

## National Poets and Cultural Saints of Europe: Estonian (questionnaire)

Literary culture: Estonian

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1. *Which individual poet (male or female) is generally considered to be the greatest poet in your literary tradition? (Give the first name, last name, year of birth, and year of death.)*

This question is not easily answered from the Estonian point of view because none of the poets are unanimously perceived as the greatest. Rather, each creative generation from the late nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century produced one generally recognized greatest poet: Juhan Liiv (1864–1913), Gustav Suits (1883–1956), Marie Under (1883–1980), and Betti Alver (1906–1989). For later generations, there might be even less unanimity because the cultural situation grew more complex and poetics more varied, but no single poet has been unanimously considered the greatest of all times. (Depending on the scholar's, critic's, or reader's taste and view of history, any one of the four mentioned, or yet several others, might be named as the greatest, but others might disagree.)

2. *Are there other poets that come near or even reach such a status? If yes, name up to two, give their basic information (first name, last name, year of birth, and year of death), and assess their stature in relation to the greatest poet (scale 1–5; 5 = "equally important," 1 = "marginal in comparison to").*

See previous answer.

3. *Is there a (single) poet that is considered the "national" poet? (Give the first name, last name, year of birth, and year of death.) Is the notion of "national poet" (NP) widespread in your literary culture? (Assess on a scale of 1–5; 1 = "irrelevant," 5 = "very common.")*

Lydia Jannsen (a.k.a. Koidula, 1843–1886); the notion of national poet is fairly common [4].

4. *Were there many rival poets to the position of national poet during the canonization process that were later marginalized? If yes, name up to three, give their basic information (first name, last name, year of birth, and year of death), and assess the decade of their utmost presence in the canonization processes (e.g., 1880s). (If there is no NP, answer for the "greatest" poet.)*

Not really. Koidula was easily welcomed as the greatest poet of her generation, and her talent rather quickly recognized (and then honed in private correspondence) by the former generation's main poetic authority, Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald (1803–1882), the author of the national epic *Kalevipoeg* (Kalev's Son, 1857). Koidula had several epigones among her contemporaries, but was unanimously considered one of the main leaders and an icon of the national movement.

5. *Which period of canonization of the NP (or the greatest poet in case of no NP) was most important? (State the year or decade.) Name up to five of the most important canonization events (state the year and type; e.g., 1860: crucial textual edition; 1905: unveiling of an important memorial). Assess the current stature of the national (or greatest) poet compared to the most intense period (scale 1–5; 5 = "equally important," 1 = "marginal in comparison to").*

- 1867: Koidula's works were included in an influential elementary school textbook by Carl Robert Jakobson;
- 1870: Staging of her play *Saaremaa onupoeg* (A Cousin from Saaremaa) launched the activities of the Vanemuine drama society, and came to be considered the beginning of original Estonian drama and theatre production;
- 1929: A monument (by the eminent sculptor Amandus Adamson) was set up and a park dedicated to her in her home town Pärnu;
- 1946: Reburial of Koidula's relics from Kronstadt (her place of residence in later life) to Tallinn;
- 1947: The poem "Mu isamaa on minu arm" ("My Fatherland Is My Love," with music by composer Gustav Ernesaks) was sung for the first time to conclude the Estonian Song Festival; perceived as a sort of unofficial and dissident anthem during the Soviet period, it has remained the traditional finale of the Song Festival;
- 1992–2011: Koidula was depicted on the 100 kroon bill (originally the highest denomination; later on, a 500 kroon bill was added, but the "Koidula," as the 100 kroon bill was popularly referred to, remained more widely circulated and thus more visible).

The selection obviously leaves out various important events (such as publication of critical editions, correspondence, or studies; theatre productions and TV adaptations of her own plays and modern dramatic interpretations of her life and work, etc.). These are, however, events of the greatest public visibility. Koidula's stature as a national icon within the national discourse has never really waned, compared to the actual national awakening period in the nineteenth century that it could be assessed with [4]. The position of the national discourse in society and the role of literature in that discourse have, of course, shifted over time.

6. *Who were the individuals, institutions, and interest groups (cultural factions, political parties) that played major roles in the promotion of the canonization process? State the names and assess the most active decade(s).*

1860s: Koidula's contemporaries, members of the national awakening movement (Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald, Carl Robert Jakobson, and others);

Late 1940s: Academic interest was strongly renewed by Aino Undla-Põldmäe's (1910–1992), thorough research was started;

Since Koidula's lifetime to the present: school textbooks and song festivals have perpetuated the general public's familiarity with her work.

7. *When were the works of the national (or greatest) poet fully integrated into the education system? (Name the decade; e.g., 1910s.) Assess the overall presence of the national (or greatest) poet and his or her works in education (scale 1–5; 5 = "excessive," 3 = "not particularly strong," 1 = "marginal"). If there were unusual shifts or breaks (due to politics, etc.), add a brief comment.*

1860s; the overall presence is hardly excessive, but considerably stable throughout all political regimes [4].

8. *Are there other literary writers (prose writers or playwrights) in your literary culture that come close to the canonical position of the national (or greatest) poet? If so, name up to three, give their information (first name, last name, year of birth, and year of death), and assess their stature in relation to the national (or greatest) poet (scale 1–9; 9 = "much more important," 5 = "equally important," 1 = "marginal in comparison to").*

Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald (1803–1882); poet, writer, and folklorist [5]

Juhan Liiv (1864–1913); poet [5]

Anton Hansen Tammsaare (1878–1940); prose writer [9]

9. *Are there other artists (composers, musicians, painters, architects, etc.) in your literary culture that come close to the canonical position of the national (or greatest) poet? If yes, name up to three, give their basic information (first name, last name, year of birth, and year of death), and assess their stature in relation to the national (or greatest) poet (scale 1–9; 9 = “much more important,” 5 = “equally important,” 1 = “marginal in comparison to”).*

Perhaps the graphic artist Eduard Wiiralt (1898–1954) and the composer Arvo Pärt (born in 1935) could be considered comparable sources of national pride, largely due to their (especially Pärt’s) international reach.

10. *Name up to three other individuals (in politics, military, scholarship, etc.) that were most venerated in the nation-building context and remain highly canonized today. Give their basic information (first name, last name, year of birth, and year of death) and assess their stature in relation to the national (or greatest) poet (scale 1–9; 9 = “much more important,” 5 = “equally important,” 1 = “marginal in comparison to”).*

Jakob Hurt (1839–1907); folklorist and linguist [5]

Jaak Tõnisson (1868–1941); politician [5]

Konstantin Päts (1874–1956); politician [5]

11. *Briefly describe the main reason why the chosen poet was considered “national” (or greatest in the case of no NP).*

Koidula’s talent and personality were exceptional in their socio-historical context, which coincided with the most active period of the national emancipation movement. She was openly and intensely involved in the national cause, embracing it in her poetry and other activities (journalism, theatre, and organization of the cultural life of the emerging national community).

12. *Speculate briefly on reasons why the concept of NP did (or did not) gain ground in your literary culture.*

The development of Estonian national identity and its socio-political realization has been inseparably related to literary practices since their beginning in the nineteenth century. Even the current constitution names the preservation of the Estonian language as a main *raison d’être* of the Estonian state. Literature, as a cultural practice relying on language, has long been considered a national matter in popular perception as well as in political thought.

13. *Speculate briefly on the reasons why the position of a national (or greatest) poet was either occupied by a single poet or shared by a number of poets.*

I believe that the circumstances pointed out above (see Answer 12) are one reason why the status of a single national poet cannot be easily attributed to any Estonian author. All of them have to relate to the perception of literature as an essential form of national existence, and many of them have indeed identified with this perception of their work and responsibility. All potentially national by definition, they tend to grow in this potential proportionally with their poetic merit and recognition. Another reason may be found in the relatively short, but very intense evolution of the Estonian poetry since Koidula’s day. Each generation of poets has represented not one, but several aesthetic revolutions, led by individuals whose personal creative growth and diversity have turned each of them into a one-of-a-kind key figure representing a stage in the national literature, but not closely followed by others, who are always exploring new avenues. Yet another reason may be the generally low hierarchization within Estonian culture. Singling out one authority, especially unanimously, is rare in every field.

14. *Do you notice any interesting connotations regarding the canonization of a national (or greatest) poet that resemble the veneration and cults of religious saints? What about other artists? Specify briefly.*

Studies and polls have shown the Estonians to be one of the least religious populations in the world. On the one hand, it could be said that, whatever religious sentiment there is, it has long and often been projected on the national cause, on culture, and especially on language and literature. Therefore, obviously, writers have represented for the Estonian public something that perhaps priests or saints represent in a more religious culture. On the other hand, because the veneration of saints in the actual religious sense is not part of Estonian culture (not even where religious sentiment and institutions do apply; Lutherans do not venerate saints, but rather the written word, even in religious practices), the parallel probably does not apply at all in public perception.