

National Poets and Cultural Saints of Europe: Icelandic (questionnaire)

Literary culture: Icelandic

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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.)

Jónas Hallgrímsson (1807–1845)

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”).

Not really.

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.”)

Jónas Hallgrímsson (1807–1845); the notion of a national poet (*þjóðskáld*) is quite widespread [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.)

Rival poets during the nineteenth century primarily included Bjarni Thorarensen (1786–1841); he was most present between 1850 and 1880.

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”).

The most important year in Hallgrímsson’s canonization is 1907. The main events include:

1847: The first edition of his poems, with an important introduction by Konráð Gíslason;

1883: The second edition of his poems, with an important introduction by Hannes Hafstein;

1907: The unveiling of a statue of Hallgrímsson in Reykjavík;

1946: The transferal of Hallgrímsson’s remains from Denmark to the national cemetery of Iceland;

1996: Iceland’s Ministry of Education and Culture declares Hallgrímsson’s birthday (November 16th) to be Icelandic Language Day, and begins giving out awards in his name.

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).*

1880s: The Icelandic Literary Society;

1890–1940: The Icelandic Student Association;

1940s: The Icelandic Association of Artists and the Icelandic Parliament;

1996–2007: The Ministry of Education and Culture;

2007–: The Cultural Society of Hraun in Öxnadalur (Hallgrímsson's birthplace); the society was a local interest group that received financial support from Icelandic banks to turn Hallgrímsson's birthplace into a writers' residence.

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.*

Integration into the education system had already begun in the 1850s with the publication of a collection of Icelandic poems. The presence of Hallgrímsson's works in education is not overly emphasized [3].

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”).*

Halldór Laxness (1902–1998); novelist [3]

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”).*

Jóhannes Kjarval (1885–1972); painter [2]

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”).*

Jón Sigurðsson (1811–1879); politician [7]

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

Hallgrímsson was a member of a group of young intellectuals that lived in Copenhagen in the 1830s and 1840s, publishing the progressive journal *Fjölnir*, which was important for the nation-building process. He wrote important patriotic poems and influential nature poems. His friend (and member of the *Fjölnir* group) Konráð Gíslason, as well as the following generations of poets and intellectuals, were active in cultivating his memory.

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

I assume that the concept of a national poet was partially due to foreign influence; it was a part of the nation-building process to “produce” at least one national poet, but one should also bear in mind that Iceland has a long literary tradition, and that poetry and poems were important in terms of cultural capital.

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.*

Hallgrímsson met many (or all?) of the qualifications of a national poet (dramatic life, early death, patriotic themes in poetry, political vision, etc.), and after the 1880s no one really contested his status. However, it might have affected his position that Jón Sigurðsson was the more important national symbol.

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.*

Two events are particularly interesting. The first is a book of fairytales and a few published poems that were produced through automatic writing in Reykjavik in 1906. It was claimed that this literature was either by Hans Christian Andersen and translated by Jónas Hallgrímsson, or written by Hallgrímsson himself. The second event is the translation of Hallgrímsson’s relics from Denmark to Iceland in 1946. The reburial was organized and partially paid for by an Icelandic industrialist that claimed he had been in telepathic contact with the poet, who said he wanted to come home. In a nationalistic context, these events may seem quite absurd, but in a religious context they might have passed for miracles.