

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

Literary culture: Lithuanian

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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.)

Jonas Mačiulis (a.k.a. Maironis; 1862–1932)

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”).

Kristijonas Donelaitis (1714–1780) [4]

Vincas Mykolaitis (a.k.a. Putinas; 1893–1967) [2]

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.”)

Maironis (1862–1932); the notion of a national poet is not entirely common in Lithuania, although it is not irrelevant [4]; the notion of a “national bard” is more common.

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.)

Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855); canonization occurred from the 1850s to the 1880s;

Antanas Baranuskas (1835–1902); canonization occurred in the 1890s;

Vincas Kudirka (1858–1899); canonization occurred from the 1900s to the 1920s.

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”).

1895: The first edition of Maironis' collection of verses *Pavasario balsai* (Voices of Spring);

1922: His sixtieth birthday, with many reviews of his oeuvre in the Lithuanian media;

1968: The first book about the poet in Soviet Lithuania, by Vanda Zaborskaitė;

1988: The year of the Singing Revolution, when his poems were sung as national anthems.

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).*

1920s: Juozas Tumas (a.k.a. Vaižgantas); a prominent writer that analyzed Maironis' oeuvre;

1926–1940: Period of the nationalist party (*Tautininkų partija*), which was the leading political force under the authoritarian president Antanas Smetona;

After 1940: Lithuania was occupied and annexed by the Soviet Union; Maironis was part of the literary canon, but was denounced as a “bourgeois” poet; his verses were censored;

1988–1990: The period of the Singing Revolution; Maironis was re-discovered.

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.*

Maironis' works were integrated into the education program during the 1920s, when Lithuania was an independent republic; during the period of Stalinist terror (1944–1953) only censored fragments existed in the educational program: mainly Maironis' satires, which were interpreted as anti-bourgeois. The entire oeuvre of Maironis can only be appreciated by Lithuanian readers after 1990, when the full collection of his works was published. However, the presence of his works in educational programs is not excessive [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”).*

Vincas Krėvė (a.k.a. Mickevičius; 1882–1954); prose writer [4]

Juozas Tumas (a.k.a. Vaižgantas; 1869–1933); prose writer, essayist [4]

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”).*

Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis (1875–1911); composer and symbolist painter that greatly influenced modern Lithuanian literary culture [5]

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”).*

Jonas Basanavičius (1851–1927); politician, journalist, and folklore researcher [5]

Motiejus Valančius (1801–1875); prose writer and bishop of Samogitia (part of Lithuania); activist of the national revival [3]

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

Maironis was considered a national poet because he created poetic genres of the Lithuanian lyrical tradition, reformed the system of Lithuanian versifications (turning from syllabic to a syllabo-tonic system), introduced classical forms of poetry, maintained the political ideas of Lithuanian autonomy and independence, introduced the geographical and historical models of an integral Lithuanian “map” (because some territories were disputed during the period 1918–1920), and created the nationalist myths of the medieval Lithuanian state and many national stereotypes.

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

In Lithuanian literary culture, the concept of a national poet was introduced relatively recently, when the Romanticist notion of the bard had been outdated and poetic tradition was alienated from folklore. This concept implied the status of a national spiritual leader, and it was even more obvious if one takes into account that Maironis was a Catholic priest, a high-ranked clergyman.

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.*

Maironis quickly achieved the status of a national poet, and he was a lone figure because the period when he emerged was a very depressed one for Lithuanian literary culture: the printing of books in Latin script had been banned by the Tsarist bureaucrats, and the Lithuanian language expelled from public life. Maironis was influenced by the Polish-speaking, Lithuanian historical lyrical tradition, but he was the only Lithuanian poet of that period (1880–1904; the ban on printing Lithuanian in the Latin alphabet was withdrawn in 1904) whose works were appreciated by common peasants (as songs) and by the intelligentsia equally. Maironis impressed the generation of Lithuanian Neo-Romanticist poets, but most of the younger artists tried to disassociate themselves from his tradition.

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.*

Maironis was regarded as a cultural saint when he was still alive. Streets were named after him, his poetic dramas were related to the national festivals, and representatives of the ruling nationalist regime quoted his works and called him one of the fathers of the state. His funeral was attended by masses of Lithuanians in 1932, and his mausoleum was built in the crypt of Kaunas Cathedral. Maironis' authority was not denied even after 1940, when Lithuania was Sovietized for the first time. Maironis' posthumous fame could be compared only to that of Čiurlionis, whose works were also regarded as national treasures immediately after his death in 1911.