

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

Literary culture: Finnish

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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.)

Johan Ludvig Runeberg (1804–1877); wrote in Swedish

Aleksis Kivi (1834–1872); wrote in Finnish

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”).

Elias Lönnrot (1802–1884) [4,5]: Most of the Finnish-language literary histories start with anonymous folk poetry that was collected, edited and published as a national epos *Kalevala* in 1835 and 1849 (extended version) by Elias Lönnrot. Historically, the idea of Lönnrot’s status as a “poet” has varied; Lönnrot considered himself as the last “singer” of the traditional, authentic (Finnish) folk poetry. However, Lönnrot could be included among NPs, particularly as many Kalevalaic themes and motifs, deriving from his *Kalevala*, were very visible in the late nineteenth-century literary and pictorial culture. The Finnish Literature Society was established in 1831 partly to support Lönnrot’s work.

Eino Leino (1878–1926); a poet and prominent Finnish-language competitor to Runeberg [4]

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.”)

Johan Ludvig Runeberg and Aleksis Kivi. NP is usually used in regard to Runeberg. The more flexible and thus perhaps more widely used term is that of a “national writer/author”, which applies better to the nineteenth-century Finnish-language literary tradition (Aleksis Kivi).

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.)

For Runeberg there were no serious rivals, as his Swedish *Tales of Ensign Stål* (Fänrik Ståls sägner, 1848, 1860) quickly received such a prominent position in the literary culture of the Grand Duchy of Finland that it was difficult to challenge his status as the national poet. Runeberg was venerated, even worshipped already in his lifetime. This was also due to the fact that the much wider public sphere in the former patria Sweden promoted the circulation of his oeuvre.

Aleksis Kivi’s Finnish-language works are quite a remarkable achievement considering the state of Finnish literature in the 1860s and 1870s. There were other contemporary authors who experimented with Finnish poetry and short prose (also in translations), but it is easy to see why they were forgotten quickly. One of Kivi’s competitors was the poet, professor, and linguist August Ahlqvist (1826–1889, published under the pseudonym A. Oksanen). Ahlqvist was also Kivi’s most severe critic.

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”)

Johan Ludvig Runeberg was already canonized during his lifetime, but the most intense periods were the 1880s and 1890s. Most important events:

- 1860s–1870s: translations of *The Tales of Ensign Stål* (1848, 1860) into Finnish;
- 1885: the founding of the Swedish Literature Society in Finland as a memorial to the “national poet”;
- 1885: unveiling of the statues of Runeberg in the centre of Helsinki and in Porvoo;
- 1880s and 1890s: illustrated editions of *The Tales of Ensign Stål* by J. A. Malmström in Sweden (early 1880s) and by A. Edelfelt in Finland (1890s); Runeberg’s canonicity got an additional boost during the so-called Russification efforts in the 1890s;
- 1930–2005: complete works of Runeberg (the Swedish Literature Society in Finland and Svenska Vitterhetssamfundet i Sverige).

The canonization of Aleksis Kivi started gradually after his death but it intensified in the 1910s, when researchers aimed at elevating Kivi to a canonical status on a par with Runeberg. Most important events:

- 1877–1878: publication of Kivi’s selected works (including his first short biography, published in a magazine already in 1872);
- 1908: the illustrated edition of Kivi’s novel *Seven Brothers* (1870) by Akseli Gallen-Kallela, one of the artists of the “Golden Age”;
- 1915–1917: Vilho Tarkiainen’s biography of Aleksis Kivi in 1915 (based on his dissertation on Kivi 1910); collected works (1916–1917);
- 1939: unveiling of the statue of Kivi in front of the Finnish National Theatre, Helsinki;
- 1941: the establishment of the Aleksis Kivi Society;
- 2010: critical editions of Kivi’s works (the Finnish Literature Society, on-going project).

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).

Johan Ludvig Runeberg:

- Local nationalists in the Grand Duchy of Finland who aimed at creating a national literary tradition, in the first phase in Swedish;
- Veterans of the 1808–1809 war themselves;
- The Swedish Literature Society in Finland, from the 1880s onwards;
- Translators (for example the circle around Julius Krohn, a prominent figure in the field of literature and culture in the 1860s and 1870s), composers (e.g. Fredrick Pacius, Jean Sibelius) and artists (e.g. Albert Edelfelt);
- Military: one of Runeberg’s poems became the honorary march of the Finnish Defence Forces after 1918;
- The educational system.

Aleksis Kivi:

- The Estates: the State prize for Literature in 1865;
- The Finnish Literature Society: the society published (and edited) Kivi’s works from the 1870s onwards; the Aleksis Kivi literary prize was established in 1936;
- Finnish-language nationalists in the Grand Duchy of Finland;

Artists (e.g. Aleksis Gallen-Kallela), the Finnish Theatre Company and provincial Finnish-language theatres;
The Aleksis Kivi Society: from the 1940s onwards.

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.*

J. L. Runeberg:

1850s–1950s: Runeberg held a visible and steady position in literary curriculum both in Swedish and in Finnish from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, although challenged by Kivi (in Finnish literature) from the early twentieth century onwards. Runeberg’s position was indisputable at least until the World War II [5].

Aleksis Kivi:

1880–1890s; until the 1890s, Runeberg and Lönnrot’s *Kalevala* were much more important in the literary curriculum than Kivi’s works [3];

1890s–1950s: 4–5; by the 1920s, Kivi’s *Seven Brothers* had a steady and central position in the Finnish literary curriculum [4.5].

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”).*

Zacharias Topelius (1818–1898); historian, author of numerous fictional and non-fictional works [4]

Minna Canth (1844–1897); realist playwright [3.5]

Väinö Linna (1920–1992); novelist (brought the Finnish civil war of 1918 and later the experience of World War II into the limelight) [6]

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”).*

Jean Sibelius (1865–1957); composer [9]

Akseli Gallen-Kallela (1865–1931); one of the “Golden Age” painters [7]

Alvar Aalto (1898–1976); architect [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”).*

Jaakko Ilkka (unknown); late 16th-century leader of a peasant rebellion [5]

Johan Vilhelm Snellman (1806–1881); “national philosopher” [4]

Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim (1867–1951); military leader and statesman [9]

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

Runeberg was already an established and celebrated author both in the Grand Duchy of Finland and in its former fatherland Sweden when he published his Swedish-language epic poem *The Tales of Ensign Stål*. The cycle of poems portrayed what became known as the Finnish War (1808–1809): a war that was fought between Sweden and Russian during the Napoleonic Wars. Sweden lost and ceded a major portion of its heartlands (Finland) to the Russian Empire. Runeberg’s work decisively shaped the cultural memory of the war: it celebrated the “ordinary soldier”, rebuked the Swedish king Gustav IV Adolph and his closest circle, and turned the defeat into a moral victory. At the same time it established an image of a humble yet resilient Finnishness and promoted conservative patriotism. The educational system contributed decisively to the cult of Runeberg and his works: all Finns read Runeberg’s *Ensigns* (Vänrikki) during their school years, and it thus constituted a “national collection of citations” from early on.

The canonicity of Runeberg was (and is) strengthened by the fact that the Finnish national anthem “Our Land” (Vårt Land 1848; in Finnish Maamme, 1853) is based on a poem written by Runeberg (with music composed by Fredrik Pacius) that was published in the first part of *The Tales of Ensign Stål*. Moreover, the poem “March of the Pori Regiment” (Björneborgarnas marsch; Porilaisten marssi) that Runeberg wrote for a pre-existing melody for the second part of *The Tales* (1860, Finnish translation 1889), resonated culturally immediately. In 1918, the march became the honorary march of the Finnish Defence Forces, and it is still used in governmental occasions (it is also played on radio or television every time a Finnish athlete wins a gold medal in Olympic games).

Compared to Runeberg, Aleksis Kivi’s path to the cultural high canon was much slower, although for the Finnish-speaking nationalists this artist and his untimely and tragic death carried huge symbolic value. In the mid-nineteenth century, most of the intelligentsia of the Grand Duchy of Finland was Swedish-speaking. Finnish was mainly a language of church and folklore. Thus, Kivi – whose mother tongue was Finnish – was truly the cultural hero the Finnish-language nationalists had been longing for. The circles supporting Kivi lauded him as the first “real” Finnish-language author when he published his play *Nummisuutarit* (Heath Cobblers) in 1864. His later realistic novel *Seitsemän veljestä* (Seven Brothers, 1870) is generally regarded the “national novel” of Finland. Moreover, Kivi even utilized Kalevalaic themes, particularly in his play *Kullervo* (1864). However, certain parts of Kivi’s oeuvre were also considered problematic, particularly in regard to their “dialectal” language and unpolished, realistic characters, and consequently some of his works were heavily edited/censored.

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

Conceptualizing someone as a “national poet” was naturally a means to participate in a European-wide circulation of ideas about nationalism and its proper/correct “phenotype”, including the need to create national literatures, theatres, national canons of historical events etc. Particularly the newborn nations may have invested heavily in different mechanisms to form “original” or “authentic” cultures (e.g. literary prizes). The literary scholar Alexander Beecroft has recently observed that the key trope of a national literary ecology is literary history, and that certain structural features and literary devices of literary histories have a strong transnational character. The same applies to the idea of a “national poet”, enhanced by the need to compose literary histories, which manifested the vitality of their respective literary cultures (coincidentally, the first sketch for a Finnish literary history was published in 1858, in the era of Runeberg’s elevation to a NP).

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.*

The Grand Duchy of Finland was a trilingual country (the former imperial language, Swedish, continued to be the language of elite culture; the vernacular language, Finnish, was gradually becoming a language of high culture; and the new imperial language, Russian, was partly used in administration). The first

generation of domestic Finnish-language authors was usually bilingual (Swedish and Finnish) which meant that literary influences constantly and swiftly crossed the linguistic borders. The Swedish-speaking Runeberg was the national author of this first generation but, due to the subject matter of his main work and its usability in shifting political circumstances (*The Tales* could be used both as a token of loyal, conservative nationalism and of national resilience and resistance), he also became the author of the Finnish-speaking population (in Finnish translations).

However, when Finnish took over as the main language of culture and administration by the end of the nineteenth century and the political strife between language-based political parties intensified, it became increasingly topical to construct and maintain parallel (Finnish and Swedish) literary and cultural canons. The establishment of the Swedish Literature Society in Finland in 1885 is a prime example of this, as is the tradition of writing separate literary histories, and the promotion of Aleksis Kivi to the national literary canon.

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.*

There are many overlapping features in the cults of religious saints and those of cultural heroes. These may deal with questions such as: How to ensure constant remembrance and how to make the transmission and “recycling” effective (memorable) but at the same time, controllable? Moreover, the multimediality of canonizing processes must be a shared feature, but it might also be that disagreements and cultural or religious strifes are signs of canonicity and memorability, and contribute to it? In the field of culture, and perhaps also in the veneration of religious saints, one can also observe an interesting and constant process of “hybrid canonization”, for example when lauded artists are asked to illustrate the works of canonical or “canonizable” literary authors.