

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

Literary culture: Czech

Contributor: Miloš Zelenka, full professor

Institution: University of South Bohemia, České Budějovice

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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.)

Karel Hynek Mácha (1810–1836)

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”).

Jan Neruda (1834–1891) [4]

Jaroslav Vrchlický (1853–1912) [3]

Josef Václav Sládek (1845–1912) [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.”)

In Czech culture, the term “national poet” refers to two poets:

Karel Hynek Mácha (1810–1836) [5]

Jan Neruda (1834–1891) [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.)

Karel Jaromír Erben (1811–1870); 1860s

Vítězslav Hálek (1835–1874); 1870s

Josef Václav Sládek (1845–1912); 1890s

Svatopluk Čech (1846–1908); 1900s

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”).

1858: Publication of the almanac *Máj* (May), in which the emerging artistic generation symbolically accepted Mácha’s work as its model [5];

1862: The first comprehensive edition of Mácha’s works in two volumes (J. L. Kober Publishing) [3];

1890–1900s: Modern Czech poetry rejects the “national” patriotic tradition and proclaims Mácha a “forefather” of symbolic expressivity [4];

1936: The centennial of Mácha’s death is widely celebrated and triggers the publication of collections and research volumes, including the collection of the Prague Linguistic Circle *Torso a tajemství Máchova díla* (Torso and the Secrets of Mácha’s Work, 1938, ed. by Jan Mukařovský), as well as important new poetry (Josef Hora: *Máchové variance* ‘Mácha Variations’) [4];

1939, May: Solemn reburial of Mácha’s remains at the Czech “pantheon” in Vyšehrad (after the transfer from German-annexed Litoměřice); it was the first nationwide demonstration against the annexation and Nazism [5].

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).*

1840s: Karel Sabina, Mácha’s fellow poet, becomes a passionate interpreter, advocate, and publisher of his work immediately after his death;

1850–1860: The “Majejci” poetic group (Jan Neruda, Vítězslav Hálek, etc.);

1930–1936: František Xaver Šalda, the greatest Czech critic, writes a study about Mácha;

1928–1936: The Prague Linguistic Circle (Jan Mukařovský and Roman Jakobson) displays lasting scholarly interest in Mácha’s work;

1959–1972: The Institute of Czech Literature (*Ústav pro českou literaturu ČSAV*) produces a three-part critical edition of Mácha’s works and encourages a number of scholars to engage in further research (including popularization among the public).

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.*

Mácha’s texts have been a permanent part of Czech readers and textbooks since the 1860s [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”).*

Alois Jirásek (1851–1930), prose writer [4]

Karel Čapek (1890–1938), prose writer and playwright [5]

Jaroslav Hašek (1883–1923), prose writer [5]

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”).*

Bedřich Smetana (1824–1884), composer [7]

Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904), composer [7]

Mikuláš Aleš (1852–1913), painter [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”).

Tomáš G. Masaryk (1850–1937), politician, statesman, philosopher [9]

František Palacký (1798–1876), historian, politician (“father of the nation”) [5]

Josef Dobrovský (1753–1829), philologist [5]

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

Karel Hynek Mácha is considered to be the only “pure” Romanticist in the Czech tradition and the founder of the modern poetic language. Mácha became a symbol of youth and lovers (a celebration of love and nature). All generations of Czech poets responded positively and creatively to his work. Mácha’s legacy has become a permanent part of national art (music, painting, sculpture, and film) and Mácha is currently read and intertextually used in various artistic fields.

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

Karel Hynek Mácha was considered a genius in his lifetime, but was also rejected by major critics until the “May” generation in the 1850s revived his aesthetic legacy. His tragic early death (he was only 26) also contributed to his canonization. As a national poet, Mácha has served as a symbol of love, youth, the celebration of nature, and the mysteries of man (the secret of posthumous life, the contradiction of material transience, and spiritual eternity). His monument on Petřín Hill (the Prague gardens) is still a favorite meeting place for lovers.

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 position of a national poet is mostly identified with Mácha in the Czech tradition. This can partly be explained by his exclusivity and loneliness, and his “romantic” conflict with his own epoch (Mácha was criticized in his life as an anti-national poet). Moreover, his lyrical-epic poem *Máj* (May, 1836) became an example of a revolutionary uprising against the predestination of fate, and its bold aesthetic expression anticipated modern artistic trends.

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.

Interesting connotations concerning the canonization of Mácha stemmed from the contradictions of his short life (lack of credible messages, lack of portraiture, etc.) and his reception (worship by all artistic generations, national strata, and political regimes). The mysteries and uncertainties of his biography as well as his polythematic work (e.g., his intimate diaries can be read as pornography) allowed for a high degree of interpretative and ideological dispersion.