

Emily Dickinson's Prewar Martial Poems

Junko Kanazawa

During the Civil War, Dickinson wrote poems related to the conflict. However, we cannot dismiss the fact that Dickinson wrote a group of martial poems containing war-related vocabulary during the period 1858–1860, before the Civil War broke out. The period is regarded as very important for Dickinson's career as it is the time when she began to think of becoming a poet. The existence of these antebellum martial poems indicates that Dickinson did not suddenly take up martial vocabulary following the outbreak of the war; rather, she had already discovered this manner of describing warfare. It can be said that Dickinson adopted this vocabulary from the New England traditional religious context. Reading Dickinson's prewar martial poems, we can see a pattern wherein there is uncertainty that any reward will actually be granted, which differs from the traditional way of development. Comparing them with a poem by Helen Hunt Jackson, who lived at the same time and under similar circumstances as Dickinson, we can recognize particular features in Dickinson's martial poems. These poems show that Dickinson drew from the same vein of expression as did her contemporaries, but her poetry deviates from the stock into her own usage.