

Document 23.4 William Shakespeare Hays, "The Drummer Boy of Shiloh" (1863)

Tragic war songs often trafficked in tropes and imagery borrowed from parlor ballads and the culture of sentimentality. "Mother" became a central figure, and children, those other stalwarts of sentimental culture, made frequent appearances as well, often in the form of the dying drummer boy. While the service (and not infrequent death) of young men remains one of the more brutal facts of Civil War history, in song the tragic drummer boy became a recurrent figure whose presence was often linked to that of the mother. The Kentucky composer William Hays wrote the most popular drummer-boy song, following the Battle of Chickamauga in September 1863.

*On Shiloh's dark and bloody ground,
The dead and wounded lay,
Amongst them was a drummer boy,
That beat the drum that day.
A wounded soldier raised him up,
His drum was by his side,
He clasped his hands and raised his eyes
And prayed before he died.
He clasped his hands and raised his eyes
And prayed before he died.*

*Look down upon the battle field,
Oh Thou, our Heav'nly friend,
Have mercy on our sinful souls,
The soldiers cried, "Amen."
For gather'd round a little group,
Each brave man knelt and cried,
They listen'd to the drummer boy
Who prayed before he died,
They listen'd to the drummer boy,
Who prayed before he died.*

*"Oh Mother!" said the dying boy,
"Look down from Heav'n on me,
Receive me to thy fond embrace,
Oh take me home to thee.
I've loved my country as my God,
To serve them both I've tried,"—
He smiled, shook hands, death seized the boy
Who prayed before he died,
He smiled, shook hands, death seized the boy,
Who prayed before he died.*

*Each soldier wept then like a child,
Stout hearts were they and brave;
The flag his winding sheet, God's book
The key unto his grave.
They wrote upon a simple board
These words, "This is a guide
To those who mourn the drummer boy
Who prayed before he died,
To those who mourn the drummer boy
Who prayed before he died."*

Source: *Songs of Love and Liberty. Compiled by a North Carolina Lady* (Raleigh: Branson & Farrar, 1864), 50–51.