

NONFICTION

Paglia's criticism pure poetry

By Christopher Benson
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

That lady is a vamp.
Camille Paglia — '60s rebel, street-wise feminist and militant reformer of the academy — has described her interpretive style as "vamping": the reinvigoration of a familiar text with "energy, originality, spontaneity and emotional truth." To use a biblical analogy, Paglia pours new wine into old wineskins and, more often than not, they burst with her ingenuity.

She's vamping again in her latest book of literary criticism, *Break, Blow, Burn*. The title comes from a poem by John Donne and applies to her "secular but semimystical view of art" that "taps primal energies, breaks down barriers and imperiously remakes our settled way of seeing."

In the introduction she writes, "Criticism at its best is re-creative, not spirit-killing. Technical analysis of a poem is like breaking down a car engine, which has to be reassembled to run again."

After deconstructing 43 poems in the Western tradition, some old and some new, Paglia emerges as a gifted auto mechanic who has shown us that all the constituent parts of a poem are vital to its function and its appreciation. Paglia presents each poem line by line and then gets out of the way so the poem can radiate.

For example, *The Red Wheelbarrow* is a familiar poem to many schoolchildren. William Carlos Williams borrows the simplicity and image-soaked language of Asian poetry to lament "a stable agrarian society that was already

Break, Blow, Burn

■ **By Camille Paglia.** Pantheon, 256 pages, \$20.

■ **Grade:** A

slipping away."
*so much depends
upon
a red wheel
barrow
glazed with rain
water
beside the white
chickens.*

From these 8 lines and 16 words, Paglia offers dazzling commentary. On structure, she discerns "each of Williams's neat, tiny stanzas has a recessive wheelbarrow shape: the first line is the wheelbarrow's long handles, while the daringly terse, one-word second line mimics the sloping cart."

"As an ordinary, functional, workaday object, the wheelbarrow wouldn't rate a second glance from most passers-by," she writes. "But the poem sees it as potentially as beautiful and significant as any high symbol of art or culture."

Consequently, she concludes: "Solid and sturdy, the wheelbarrow represents Williams's practical view of poetry: the artwork collects and transports material reality, but we do the sorting. In a democratic age of universal literacy, the artist is neither king nor outcast but the reader's companion and equal partner. The leveling of hierarchies is also suggested by the poem's humbling

avoidance of capital letters."

Readers receive a marvelous education when Paglia mines John Donne's *Holy Sonnet XIV*, a peculiar marriage of sex and religion whose source is the Old Testament's *Song of Songs*. She teases out paradoxes in Donne's poem relating to how "true freedom . . . comes only through servitude to God" and how "we will never be pure until we are abducted and raped by God," a sensational insight tethered to the last line of the poem, "Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me." We might blush at some of her suggestions, but Paglia isn't prudish.

And the "tough-cookie feminism" of Paglia enables her to unleash the thematic content of Rochelle Kraut's *My Makeup*:

"The title cuts two ways: 'My Makeup' refers to one's constitution or psychology as well as to cosmetics . . . Hence the title puns on soul versus surface, substance versus style . . . in life or art, she claims, she has no masks; she is simply herself. Yet the denial of fiction is itself a fictive act." Brilliant insights like this permeate the book.

Paglia disrobes her readers of faddish ideas and lazy observations, but never for the sake of humiliation — she's interested in the naked power and majesty of words. Her voice, resembling her description of Kraut, is "the voice of modern woman: tough, blunt, pragmatic. The feminine veils of modesty, delicacy and sentiment have been stripped away."

Some readers may pine away for a softer reading of poetry — but that kind of reading would not break, blow and burn.

Christopher Benson is a freelance writer living in Littleton.

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- 93 Barely manage
94 Nasty mood
95 Swear solemnly
96 Ancient ointment
97 Weakest
100 Fond farewells
103 Brubeck of jazz
104 Japanese mattress
105 Usual practice
109 Vaunt
110 Bright flower
111 Caesar's worst day
112 Baked item
113 Turtle-to-be
114 Play hockey
116 Actor — Parker
117 Little swallow
118 Hairy insect
119 Spinks of the ring
121 Fill with wonder
122 Actor — Gulager
124 New York Giants hero
125 What the walls have?
126 Slick
128 Weed whackers

- 11 Potential
12 Photo
13 Insignificant
14 Liverpool chap
15 Fashion item
16 Scorecard division
17 Forum attire
18 British school
19 Mach 2 fliers
21 Very or too
29 Low-fat spreads
31 Singing brothers
34 Vaccine amts.
36 Knife wound
37 "Miami Vice" cop
38 Grad
41 Ibsen heroine
42 Fine (hyph.)
44 Chits
45 Crafty move
46 Slim down
48 Jung's first name
49 — Raton, Fla.
50 Sway
51 Back when

