
Restoring Trust in Texts: Felski and the Case for Postcritical Reading

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Abstract:

This article explores Rita Felski's influential critique of academic reading practices in her book *The Limits of Critique* (2015). Felski questions the widespread reliance on the "hermeneutics of suspicion," a sceptical approach rooted in Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche that treats texts as objects to be unmasked for hidden ideologies. She argues that this dominant critical mood, characterized by detachment and exposure, limits scholars' engagement with literature's aesthetic, emotional, and transformative power.

Felski proposes postcritical reading as a more balanced alternative. This approach shifts scholars from a defensive position "behind" the text to an open, receptive stance "in front" of it, viewing literary works as active participants capable of forging new attachments and meanings across time. Drawing on actor-network theory and other traditions, she advocates integrating critique as one tool among many, rather than the default mode of interpretation. Ultimately, Felski seeks to restore trust in texts and strengthen the public relevance of the humanities.

Keywords: Rita Felski, postcritical reading, hermeneutics of suspicion, critique, literary theory, affect and attachment, humanities, aesthetic engagement, actor-network theory, surface reading

Rita Felski (1956–) is a highly influential Australian-born literary scholar and cultural theorist whose research reshape how we think about the sociology of literature, gender, and modernity. Across notable books like *The Gender of Modernity* (1995), *Literature After Feminism* (2003), and *The Limits of Critique* (2015), Felski challenges conventional academic reading habits. She argues that scholars should

focus more on aesthetic enjoyment and deep textual engagement rather than relying solely on aggressive scepticism. Her clear and accessible writing style has made her a central figure in modern debates regarding the future of the humanities.

A primary focus of Felski's scholarship is the academic overreliance on what philosopher Paul Ricoeur famously called the *hermeneutics of suspicion*. This sceptical mindset—rooted in the philosophies of Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Friedrich Nietzsche—treats texts with automatic doubt, assuming that true meaning is hidden beneath the surface. In *The Limits of Critique*, Felski demonstrates how this defensive, uncovering approach has spread far beyond its original boundaries to become the default methodology across the humanities and social sciences. She shows that this drive to expose hidden ideologies acts as a common link between otherwise separate academic fields, tying together diverse methods like historicism and traditional ideological analysis.

Felski's book *The Limits of Critique* aims to reframe the way we think about critique by looking at it as a unique cultural phenomenon. Instead of seeing critique just as an objective political stance or a neutral philosophical method, she views it as a kind of emotional attitude or *mood*, a specific way of speaking, and a particular kind of intellectual identity. From this angle, she explores why this way of thinking continues to appeal to academics, and she breaks down how it often depends on images of space, like the idea of *digging beneath* a text, and how it creates dramatic stories about intellectual guilt and political involvement. Although Felski recognizes the strong influence of thinkers like Michel Foucault and the Frankfurt School, she cautions against letting their sceptical methods take over academic thought entirely. She argues that being too focused on suspicion can limit other important ways of thinking and makes the humanities seem more like an enemy of society, which damages its public image. She makes clear that critical unmasking is not the only kind of thinking humans do. To show this, she refers to the work of scholar Helen Small, who points out that the main value of the humanities often comes from ways of thinking that are not confrontational—like descriptive or appreciative analysis, imaginative exploration, and creative engagement.

To help create a more balanced academic world, Felski suggests a new approach called *postcritical reading*. This method changes how scholars view texts, moving them from a defensive position behind the text to a more open and receptive one in front of it. By seeing the literary work as an active participant in a conversation

rather than something to be suspicious of, *postcritique* helps scholars use a wider range of emotional, artistic, and intellectual tools, allowing literary and cultural studies to embrace more diverse experiences. The following words make clear the real intention of Felski:

There is a growing sense that our intellectual life is out of kilter, that scholars in the humanities are far more fluent in nay-saying than in yay-saying, and that eternal vigilance, unchecked by alternatives, can easily lapse into the complacent cadences of autopilot argument. It is a matter, in short, of diminishing returns, of ways of thinking that no longer surprise us, while closing off other paths as “insufficiently critical. (P.9)

In her text, Felski talks about a serious problem in literary studies. The field is under pressure from outside doubts about the humanities and from inside, where scholars are used to being very critical. This makes it hard for them to explain why literature is important. Felski starts by pointing out how many books have titles like *Why Literature Matters* or *Why the Humanities Matter*." These titles show that the field feels the need to defend itself, in a way that sounds more like begging than real argument. She connects this anxiety to a long history of a kind of questionable critical style.

For many years, critical theory has been all about tearing things down, always looking for what's wrong or missing. This has made scholars very good at breaking things apart but not so good at building things up. Critique is great at exposing and questioning but not so good at explaining positive feelings or aesthetic value. This causes a kind of imbalance where scholars are good at unmasking power but not so good at exploring love, attachment, or personal transformation. Felski explains her main point in the following:

We are often stymied, however, when asked to account for the importance of meanings, values, and norms in all forms of life, including our own. Rigorous thinking is equated with, and often reduced to, the mentality of critique. The result can be a regrettable arrogance of intellect, where the smartest thing you can do is to see through the deep-seated convictions and heartfelt attachments of others. ‘If we humanities professors saw ourselves more often as explorers of the normative than as critics of normativity,’ Roth writes, ‘we would have

a better chance to reconnect our intellectual work to broader currents in public life.(p.16)

She also criticizes how the value of literature is often only explained through *criticality*. Critics either use critique to point out what's missing in texts or praise literature as a form of critique that challenges ideology. Both ways reduce the experience of art to a language of opposition, ignoring the power of art to change and connect people. Felski writes:

Works of art do not only subvert but also convert; they do not only inform but also transform—a transformation that is not just a matter of intellectual readjustment but one of affective realignment as well (a shift of mood, a sharpened sensation, an unexpected surge of affinity or disorientation). Works of art, Chantal Mouffe notes, can trigger passionate attachments and sponsor new forms of identification, subjectivity, and perceptual possibility. (17)

Felski isn't against critique, but she wants to see it in a different light—as just one way of looking at things among many.

By using Ricoeur's idea of a *hermeneutics of suspicion*, she shows how critique is just a common, habitual way of thinking rather than something special or unique. This opens the door to other questions, like *What about love?* or *Where is your theory of attachment?* and to new ways to talk about inspiration, comfort, recognition, and connection. She argues that relying too much on suspicion limits our understanding of the importance of literature. A better way of criticism would include both conflict and connection, treating art as something that helps us reorient ourselves and co-create rather than just take apart. This change could help literary studies move past defensiveness and give a more complete and convincing reason why literature matters.

Felski looks back on the excitement and limitations of literary theory from the 1980s onwards. She acknowledges how new ways of looking at texts—like symptomatic reading, performativity, the male gaze, and postcolonial frameworks—connected texts to bigger power structures. But she also points out that the fast pace of new theories often promised big breakthroughs, all while sharing a common sceptical attitude.

Felski argues that despite looking different, most critical approaches share a common "critical mood"—a steady, background feeling marked by skepticism, caution, and detachment.

This mood shapes how scholars approach texts, making them perceive things with guardedness, irony, and exposure rather than openness or reverence. This mindset has become so normal through academic work that it's hard to imagine any other way. Here's an example of this idea:

Critical detachment is not an absence of mood, but one manifestation of it, casting a certain shadow over its object. It colours the texts we read, endows them with certain qualities, places them in a given light. (21)

She uses thinkers like Heidegger, Amanda Anderson, and Ian Hunter to show how critique acts both as a way of talking and as a way of shaping the self. It creates a persona of being always on guard, while staying within unspoken rules. By seeing critique as a distinct way of thinking, with its own habits and *tricks*, she shifts the focus from outside reasons (like institutional or historical causes) to the inside aspects—how critique feels, how it shapes thought, and how it creates a world of meaning. This analysis shows that critique is just one way of thinking, not something special or neutral. Recognizing how it feels and acts opens the door to a richer and more varied way of reading and engaging with literature.

Even within explicitly critical frameworks, Felski observes a nuanced blend of skepticism, curiosity, deep fascination, and mixed emotions rather than pure hostility. She acknowledges existing academic movements—such as aestheticism and the New Ethics—that actively defend a text's independence, unique qualities, and fundamental strangeness. However, she argues that these defensive movements can become overly reverent, ultimately losing touch with how everyday people actually read. She says:

Critique is by no means the only method in literary studies, with its presence being more unavoidable in some fields rather than others. It tends to be a mainstay of graduate rather than undergraduate education—at least in the United States, where the remnants of a liberal arts culture still encourage quite a few English majors to avow their undying love of literature. (26)

To bridge this gap, Felski advocates for a middle ground that rejects both hyper-political reductionism and uncritical worship. She looks to the histories of cultural studies, pragmatism, feminist theory, and phenomenology as proof that scholars can analyse literature with social consciousness while still embracing joy, personal validation, and emotional resonance. This growing impatience with unrelenting scepticism is further mirrored in modern academic movements like surface reading, reparative interpretation, queer theory, and thin description. Ultimately, Felski promotes a flexible, multi-faceted approach where critique is a useful tool rather than the defining rule, encouraging a broader range of emotional and analytical styles that bridge academic critique with actual aesthetic enjoyment.

The masters of suspicion Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, and Friedrich Nietzsche, in the view of Felski reoriented interpretation away from a trust-based search for meaning, toward an aggressive unmasking of hidden motives, self-deceptions, and repressed truths. Felski applies this concept to modern literary studies, arguing that despite claims by poststructuralist theorists to have abandoned traditional interpretation, their work remains deeply interpretive. This manifestation of critique operates as a specific emotional mood and interpretive habit characterized by intense alertness, decoding, and scepticism. Felski notes that this orientation differs from clinical paranoia; instead, it is a defensive, anticipatory way of looking at a text that prioritizes uncovering hidden dangers over open-ended engagement. She says:

The difference between a hermeneutics of restoration and a hermeneutics of suspicion, we might say, lies in the difference between unveiling and unmasking. (32)

Expanding on Ricoeur's initial theory, Felski shows that this sceptical mindset is not isolated to academic circles. She traces its origins through philosophical scepticism, the complex formal structures and unreliable narrators of literary modernism, grassroots scepticism toward authority, and institutional professions like detective work or legal cross-examination. By demonstrating how commonplace and institutionalized suspicion has become, Felski demystifies it, arguing that critique is not inherently subversive. This shift allows scholars to consider alternative, less adversarial ways of reading.

Felski examines the spatial metaphors that guide suspicious interpretation, identifying two primary models: *digging down* and standing back. These spatial layouts heavily influence a scholar's emotional posture, pushing them toward detachment and vigilance. The *digging down* approach relies on Freudian psychology and Marxist frameworks, such as Fredric Jameson's concept of the political unconscious. This method views a text as a collection of layers hiding ideological contradictions or suppressed social conditions, prompting critics to excavate structural cracks to expose what the text actively hides. Conversely, the "standing back" method, influenced by Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes, avoids looking for depth in favor of creating ironic distance. Scholars using this approach aim to defamiliarize everyday concepts, showing how cultural norms are constructed. Both approaches treat the literary text as inherently deceptive, valuing counterintuitive conclusions over a reader's emotional absorption or trust. Felski argues that these metaphors artificially limit the scope of criticism and proposes a move toward reading as a collaborative act between the reader and the text.

Felski illustrates that contemporary academic critique frequently functions as a narrative genre reminiscent of detective fiction. In this framework, scholars act as investigators who scrutinize texts for hidden evidence, establish lines of causality, and distribute blame. The literary work is effectively treated as a suspect accused of hidden compliance with dominant power structures, ideologies, or discourses. This sceptical interpretative style constructs moral narratives where accidental details do not exist; instead, every element of a text is seen as connected to systemic wrongdoing. While this method offers intellectual excitement, problem-solving satisfaction, and the thrill of uncovering hidden truths, Felski notes its formulaic nature. She observes that even meta-critical attempts to deconstruct this mindset usually end up intensifying skepticism rather than escaping it. Felski observes:

The critic, like the detective, must tell a persuasive story: both slot events into a chronological sequence, track down agents engaged in wrongdoing, and parcel out blame. (87).

While this perspective successfully demystifies the storytelling conventions of academia, it risks downplaying the actual political insights that suspicious reading can yield. Felski further reflects on how deeply entrenched this sceptical posture has become within literary and cultural departments. Critique derives its rhetorical authority from presenting itself as a marginal, adversarial practice speaking truth to

power. Yet, Felski argues it has transformed from a disruptive tool into an obligatory and predictable academic standard. This framework relies heavily on specific spatial and moral tropes—such as digging beneath surfaces or hunting for hidden complicity—and routinely dismisses alternative reading practices as naive. Rather than rejecting the tradition entirely, Felski calls for a pragmatic expansion of academic reading habits. She notes that humanities departments regularly celebrate critique as an ultimate remedy for dogmatic thinking while ignoring its own formulaic boundaries. In her words:

She suggests that this approach is often championed as an antidote to dogma, yet rarely analysed in its daily application—as a blend of rhetorical devices, emotional undertones, and specific stylistic habits. Often used to defend scholarly work against perceived adversaries, it is equated with rigorous, critical thought. Consequently, Felski posits that for numerous humanities scholars, this mode of critique is seen not merely as a beneficial method, but as the sole legitimate intellectual pursuit (117-118).

To move beyond the constraints of suspicious interpretation, Felski introduces an alternative framework termed "postcritical" reading. Utilizing insights from actor-network theory (ANT), she challenges traditional historicist approaches that confine literary works strictly within their original eras. Instead, she argues that creative works possess a dynamic agency and temporary mobility that allow them to transcend their moments of production. Rather than viewing literature as a passive reflection of historical forces, Felski suggests that texts function as active participants that build new emotional links and relevance with successive generations of readers.

Consequently, she suggests treating interpretation as a collaborative process between the reader and the text, rather than an aggressive effort to deconstruct or excavate hidden faults. This shift requires acknowledging how readers and texts are mutually connected, broadening our analytical and emotional approaches, and rejecting rigid divides between literary form and historical background. A postcritical method values unexpected insights, genuine attachment, and the power of art to transform a reader's perspective while still maintaining intellectual discipline. Felski observes,

History is not a box—that is to say, standard ways of thinking about historical context are unable to explain how works of art move across time. (154).

While her scepticism toward traditional contextual analysis is persuasive, this stance could arguably undervalue the essential insights provided by detailed historical scholarship. Nevertheless, her perspective provides an optimistic alternative to the over-proliferation of hyper-skeptical academic methods.

Felski clarifies that her objections to traditional critique do not represent a retreat into conservative thought or a rejection of intellectual debate. Instead, she seeks to establish a more constructive and compelling justification for the humanities at a time when the discipline face public scepticism. She suggests that an unyielding commitment to suspicion frequently harms open public communication. While acknowledging the major contributions of critique to fields like postcolonialism and feminism, she contends that it has hardened into an expected routine that crowds out other interpretive possibilities. She outlines several core weaknesses of this sceptical habit: its narrow preoccupation with institutional compliance at the expense of artistic enjoyment, emotional connection, and ethical reflection; an emotional defensiveness that prevents open-minded engagement; a reductive view of social life as a series of power struggles; and a logical imbalance where literature is aggressively contextualised while the critic's own perspective remains unquestioned. Felski maintains that while everyday scholarly disagreement remains vital, the performative style of academic scepticism—defined by a mix of moral indignation and predictable unmasking—has become an empty ritual. Instead of endless self-reflexive doubt, she encourages adopting postcritical habits that view reading as a shared creation. This approach balances intellectual rigor with genuine wonder, fostering a richer engagement with literature and providing a stronger defence for the value of humanistic study.

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