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# Mr. Monk and the Death Drive

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## Mr. Monk and the Death Drive

GIANCARLO TARANTINO and  
D.E. WITTKOWER

We have long been familiar with dramadies, “black comedies,” and the tragicomic. Richard Klein, in his fabulous book, *Eat Fat*, even argues that Hamlet—as indicated by his name—was supposed to be played by someone a little too chubby to take all that seriously. *Monk* is something different. It shares the comic elements, of course, but it’s not a drama, a black comedy, or a tragedy; not even in part. In a drama, the hero strives to succeed, or at least struggles against failure. Monk strives to just make it day-to-day—solving crimes seems to be something he does almost to distract himself from his real struggles. In a black comedy, we laugh at the kind of thing we’re not supposed to laugh at. We may laugh at Monk sometimes, instead of with him, but it’s always a pained laughter; we identify with him even as when we laugh at his social awkwardness. And in a tragedy, the hero loses everything in the end. Whereas in *Monk*, the hero has already lost everything.

*Monk* is a kind of comedy about what happens *after* the tragedy—but the tragedy, for its part, is always serious. Consider “Mr. Monk Stays Up All Night.” It’s a goofy enough episode, overall. Throughout most of it, the viewer doesn’t even know whether a crime has been committed, much less what the crime was (or wasn’t). But while the viewer is moving forward in the plot, trying to figure out what has or hasn’t happened, Mr. Monk is concerned with something else: finding a mysterious woman for an unknown reason. After the plot has moved forward to its conclusion, Monk solves his own mystery. Upon finding the mysterious woman, he discovers why he was looking for her. Trudy was an organ donor, and this woman had been given sight when she received Trudy’s

corneas. Monk had recognized the eyes of his dead wife, and had been haunted for days, unable to sleep, preoccupied with a momentary glance from beyond the grave. A glance that held a promise of what the world once was for Monk, and what it never again could be.

While we, the viewers, move forward through the plot, Monk is always moving backwards; always trying to return to his life before the show began; always trying to recover what he has lost.

### **Repetition**

A detective story truism: The killer always returns to the scene of the crime. Why? He feels bound to it—or, as in “Mr. Monk Makes a Friend,” he wishes to retrieve his sunglasses. Whichever. But mourners and victims return to the scene of their crimes as well, and this is a bit harder to explain.

Monk, of course, wants to protect the gray wall with “B-5” written on it, because it’s the last thing that Trudy ever saw.<sup>1</sup> And, of course, he returns to her case over and over again because he wishes to solve it, and to gain some closure by making some sense of what seems like such a meaningless and incomprehensible event. In his motivation, at least, there’s no mystery. Here, he has clear psychological reasons to return to those painful scenes—it’s less painful for him to remember those tragic moments than it would be for him to let the memory of Trudy slip away. And so there is a kind of libidinal economy at work: it’s painful to remember her death, but it would be more painful to not remember her, and so he returns.

But how can we explain his fixation with naked people? Why does he dwell on them, unable to stop thinking about how they are naked? In “Mr. Monk and the Naked Man,” he looks straight in the air when talking to a nudist. Is he afraid of seeing his nudity, or is he afraid that he will *look at* his nudity? Of course, it’s both. Our phobias are also our fixations; when Monk is unable to follow up on his compulsion to look at what horrifies him—as in the strange freedom he finds after being blinded<sup>2</sup>—he is relieved.

With Dr. Kroger, he is able to trace back this particular phobia to a traumatic event. He doesn’t really remember it; he has only

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<sup>1</sup> “Mr. Monk Fights City Hall.”

<sup>2</sup> “Mr. Monk Can’t See a Thing.”

vague impressions. He's naked, and crying. There's a man in white, hitting him, and holding him upside-down. His mother is there, and she isn't stopping the man in white. In fact, she's *happy*. Dr. Kroger is able to put together that Adrian is remembering his own birth. Once Adrian is able to understand this *as a memory*—a collection of images that makes sense as thing in his life that *happened*—he is freed from his fear (mostly), and is able to think clearly about the case, since he's not always constantly distracted by thinking about how *naked* all those nudists are.

Why are we compelled to think about painful things like this; to return to these scenes of crimes long past? What did Monk gain from constantly thinking about how *naked* naked people are—where's the libidinal economy? Why didn't he just *stop* thinking about it, since he didn't like thinking about it?

### Anxiety and Trauma

In his 1920 book, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Sigmund Freud discusses the “traumatic neuroses,” including “war neuroses,” that we today call Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (or PTSD). He brings up the anxiety dreams brought on by traumatic experiences, where someone who has suffered a great trauma returns, in sleep, to the “scene of the crime.” This, he says “astonishes people far too little” (p. 11). If dreams usually function by giving us a fantasy in which our wishes and unconscious desires are fulfilled, why does the soldier, when back at home and asleep, return herself to the battlefield? Freud suggests that the function of repetition—constantly thinking of the thing we fear, whether awake or asleep—may be to gain a kind of mastery or control over the feared object or event. How this applies to milk we may never know,<sup>3</sup> but in the case of Monk's fear of nudity, we've got something to go on.

Freud uses the example of children's play. He speaks of a child he observed, who seemed to take joy in taking his toys and throwing them under and behind things. When finding them again, he would express even greater joy. While playing this game, the child—although not yet able to speak clearly—seemed to be saying “*fort*” (gone) and then “*da*” (here). Freud hypothesizes that the child is responding to his fear of his mother leaving him alone in the room. He could not control his mother's movements (although

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<sup>3</sup> Although we might suppose it would have to involve Oedipus, and weaning.

surely he tried), and so he took consolation in his ability to control his toys. By throwing them away himself, he lost a toy that he liked, but he gained more back in his feeling of power and control. His mother would go away *against* his will, but he could feel less helpless by making the toy go away *according* to his will.

And Freud goes on to point out that this is a common principle in children's games. The fact that an experience is painful or frightening does not mean the child will avoid thinking of it. In fact, "if the doctor looks down a child's throat or carries out some small operation on him, we may be quite sure that these frightening experiences will be the subject of the next game" (p. 16).<sup>4</sup> In doing so, the *fright* of the experience is lessened, because the child is able to play an active rather than a passive role.

In anxiety dreams, such as the soldier's sleeping return to the battlefield, the dreamer is also trying to be more active, less passive, and in this way, to gain some feeling of control over what has happened to her. Freud says that one thing that characterizes traumatic events is that we are unprepared for them. Something that happens suddenly and unexpectedly is far more likely to bring about dreams in which the experience is repeated. Freud hypothesizes that the function of these dreams—in which we are anxious, we return to the scene of the crime, and we know and fear what is about to happen—is that they allow us to attempt to relive the traumatic event, but with the *foreknowledge* and *anxiety* which would have made the event less frightful, sudden, and traumatic. In anxiety dreams, we are horrified to know what's about to happen—but at least this time we know what's about to happen, and this makes us feel less helpless.

And so, as long as it's more pleasurable for us to regain control than it is painful for us to return to the trauma, we will keep thinking of it again and again, and experience a constant anxiety or phobic fixation on things associated with the trauma (be they nudity, milk, toilets, snakes, or whatever else). We can loosen or release this fixation if we are able to make the traumatic event into a memory. As long as Monk only had his vague recollection of his experi-

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<sup>4</sup> In a brief scene in Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*, children are shown playing a game which seems to involve putting a bag over someone's head and interrogating them at gunpoint. It's impressive that Gilliam thought to include this detail in his dystopian world. We might wonder whether children in recent years have been playing "Guantanamo" instead of "cops and robbers."

rience at birth, he couldn't avoid his fixation with nudity. It bothered him—it was awful and painful and he couldn't stop thinking about it. As soon as this was transformed into a memory, it made sense, and he no longer needed to gain control or mastery over it. Once he understood what had happened, and had come to peace with it, nudity no longer made him feel helpless, and so he no longer needed to compel himself to keep thinking about it, so that he could retrospectively try to be anxious about it ahead of time so that his own nudity wouldn't be so traumatic. As Monk says, "One down, three hundred and twelve to go."

### **Dirt, Danger, and Disorder**

If only all of Monk's fears and fixations could simply line up in a (very) straight line, and step forward one-by-one, perhaps Monk could work through them as well as he (more or less) did in the case of nudity. And surely we all desire this on some level. The feeling of having our fears and worries crowding in on us, threatening to overtake us, is not specific to those with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. As in "Mr. Monk and the Garbage Strike," we occasionally get the sense that our "garbage" is piling up, with no hope of being taken out any time soon.

This episode provides a troubling moral dilemma for Monk. The city's garbage workers have gone on strike, and when their union boss is found dead of a supposed suicide, they suspect foul play. So Monk is on the case, with the knowledge that if he says that it was in fact a suicide, the garbage workers will go back to work and the garbage will go away again. But when the evidence points to a homicide, Monk must make a choice; to investigate the crime further while the garbage piles up, or lie to get his garbage taken out sooner. Of course Monk chooses to lie at first. But it doesn't take much prodding from Natalie—who, for Monk, is Freud's reality principle incarnate—before he resolves to sacrifice his own wish to see the city clean right away, and instead investigate the crime to help the city's garbage workers. In some ways, "Mr. Monk and Garbage Strike" is a clear expression of the inward battle that Monk no doubt goes through every day. And Freud would expect nothing less.

For Freud, what we deem ugly, dirty, different, or disorderly, is part and parcel to what provokes feelings of anxiety and fear in us. For someone like Monk, who associates anything less than complete sterilization with being dirty, it makes sense that he would be

terrified of nearly everything he comes in contact with, including nature itself as a whole, as in “Mr. Monk Gets Cabin Fever” (“Ooh, I got nature . . . I got nature on my hand!”), or “Mr. Monk is Underwater” (“I’ve got ocean in my pants! Ocean in my pants!!!”). And when these things begin to pile up, the feeling of anxiety provokes the “flight or fight” response in him, and us. Monk, left to his own powers, will often choose “flight.” However, Natalie, Dr. Kroger, Captain Stottlemeyer, and others know that Monk’s selfless desire to help is always there waiting, just barely under the surface. Here, Freud might suggest, Monk is no different than any one of us who often struggle to do the right thing. In fact, to the extent that Monk is willing to admit that he needs help to do what he feels is really the right thing, he’s got a leg up on many of us.

So what is it about dirt, garbage, and disorder that frightens Monk to the point of provoking the “flight or fight” response in him? We might say, along with Freud, that Monk feels helpless in the face of disorder, and uncleanliness. In trying to explain why people characterize certain situations as “dangerous,” Freud has this to say: What someone considers dangerous “consists in the subject’s estimation of his own strength compared to the magnitude of the danger and in his admission of helplessness in the face of it. In doing this he will be guided by the actual experiences he has had.”<sup>5</sup> It is in this light that we begin to see why Monk has such low self-esteem.

Of course his cynicism and extraordinary ability to solve crimes usually masks this, but Monk often needs Natalie to help him when he believes that he cannot deal with some impending situation on his own. Monk has deemed himself helpless in the face of what appears to be so much disorder and dirt. Monk certainly does his best to keep things tidy and clean, but with very little confidence that his actions will last. But it’s not just that Monk often feels unable to meet that demands of a situation that calls for getting his “hands dirty.” The real question is rather, “what does Monk think will happen if he is overtaken by the dirt and disorder?”

### **Fear; Rational and Otherwise**

As most viewers of the show can probably attest to, one of the great joys of “Monk” is Randy Newman’s opening theme. “It’s a

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<sup>5</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (Norton, 1989), p. 101.

"Jungle Out There" is the first glimpse we get into the heart and mind of Monk, as well as the overall mood of the show. While the content of the song is dark, its presentation, melody, and rhythm are anything but. Truthfully, for the most concise explanation of Monk's inner turmoil, one need look no further than here:

People think I'm crazy 'cause I worry all the time  
If you paid attention you'd be worried too.  
You better pay attention or this world we love so much  
Might just kill you.  
I could be wrong now  
But I don't think so.

We can see that right from the beginning, Monk's anxieties and worries deal with that most ancient of themes: death. Monk is convinced, to draw from Newman's song a bit more, that "disorder and confusion" in addition to "the very air we breath," and "the water that you drink" have the power to kill. Monk admits he might be wrong, but for his part, he's taking no chances. Enter hand sanitizer, wipes, labels, and the rest.

So Monk's sense of helplessness is not necessarily the problem (after all, who among us has the power to overcome death?), only his estimation in what is more likely to kill (jealous spouses, greedy business partners, vengeful ex-cons . . . or a handshake?). This is why we might classify Monk's anxiety as a pathological condition, and not simply heightened awareness or caution. Monk shows no more or less anxiety in the face of a gun pointed at him than anyone else, however, in the face of a painting of a spilled wine glass ("Mr. Monk and Little Monk") . . . well that's another story.

Freud too, wondered whether anxiety might be an expression of the fear of death. Ultimately, however, Freud prefers to connect the fear of death to the fear of being left alone, without that which gives life to us. As we mentioned before, the familiar games of hide-and-seek, and peek-a-boo are directly connected with a child's fear of losing (or being separated from) the parent; the provider and protector of life. And Monk has experienced this loss in some very traumatic ways, from his father's abrupt abandonment to the sudden death of Trudy.

The shock of such losses indeed seem to weight heavily on Monk, despite the overall sense of "lightness" to the show. Still, as the opening song suggests, there is a depressing cynicism to



Monk's demeanor, which often reflects the unrelenting rhythm and tempo with which his "garbage" seems to continually pile up. This is what gives Monk his likeness to Sisyphus, who was cursed forever to push a massive (yet hopefully very clean) boulder up a steep mountain, only to watch it roll back down again every time. And this struggle of Monk's with a never-ending repetitive process doesn't emerge purely from his rich history of childhood trauma, but from the process of mourning as well.

### **Mourning and Loss**

Freud writes that "one of the earliest and most important functions of the mental apparatus"—that is, our instinctual mental processes—is to "convert freely mobile cathectic energy into a mainly quiescent (tonic) cathexis."<sup>6</sup> The word "cathexis" is an obvious stumbling-block in making any sense of this claim.

Aristotle wrote of a process of "catharsis," in which pent-up emotions could be safely released through watching plays—or, for our purpose, TV shows. By identifying with a character, when things happen to that character, we are able to release our emotional charge by using the character as a proxy. And so, when we watch violent films, we are able to release some of our own stored aggression, or at least so the theory goes.<sup>7</sup>

Cathexis is the opposite of catharsis—cathexis is an investment of emotion, not a release of emotion, and 'cathectic energy' is our ability to invest in and care about things in the world, including people. And so, in that confusing quote above, what Freud is saying is that we are instinctually driven to find things in the world to care about, identify with, and invest in. This produces a disturbance in the mind when the cathected object is lost—as was the case for Monk when his father walked out on him, or when Trudy's life was taken. In both cases, the beloved object is lost; in the second case literally, and in the first case "notionally;" that is, his *notion* of his father was lost to him, since his father proved himself to be unable to unwilling to be the man that the young Adrian had believed him to be. His father as a living person survives the death of the notion of the father figure—the real Jack

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<sup>6</sup> *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p. 75.

<sup>7</sup> For more on Aristotle's theory of catharsis and tragedy, take a look at Chapter 17 in this volume.

Monk remains, hanging around in the world as a kind of embarrassing surplus.

When the love-object is lost, the mind is torn in two different directions. The pleasure principle—the mind’s tendency towards what will meet our needs and satisfy our desires—does not wish to let go of the cathected object, but reality-testing determines quickly that the love-object is no longer in the world to be found. What’s a mind to do? The healthy response is to ‘de-cathect’ the lost love-object, freeing the cathected energy to re-invest in the world. This is what we call *mourning*. Until we accept that the love-object is lost, and de-cathect it, the world appears to be a poor and empty place, because the beloved object is not in the world. And so, one who has not mourned his loss sees the world as valueless, and is unable to “move on” with his life by finding new things to care about—Monk is still mourning Trudy, and so is unable to form new romantic relationships; and Ambrose is still attached to his notion of his father as a caring father, and so is unable to let go of his childhood home, even though it is little else but a shrine to the man he believed his father to be.

### **A Haunted Man**

The process of de-cathecting is very painful, and can leave one feeling a bit like an amputee; as if a crucial part of oneself has been cut off. This is not an experience specific to those, like Monk, who have been diagnosed with some classifiable disorder. Rather, the degree to which mourning is painful, and the degree to which one never quite feels completely “over” a loss, is the degree to which the cathected object was valued and needed, or, in short, loved. Understanding Freud’s theory of mourning in this way should thus give us pause in casting people’s expressions of grief as either “weak” or “strong.” The person who appears to have grieved “painlessly” and quickly is a prime suspect for someone who has repressed, or pushed away, the reality of the loss. In this sense, the person who is “weak” in the face of loss, and nearly consumed by grief, may prove to be the more honest one, and may be stronger in his ability to face up to and admit the extent to which the loss is real, permanent, and life-changing.

Although Monk appears to have a more honest view of his father than his brother Ambrose, in dealing with the death of Trudy, he seems to have great trouble with “moving on.” To grieve Trudy’s

death is painful, but to stop grieving seems even worse. Writing about Freud's theory of mourning, the French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), wondered whether in some cases it might be impossible to ever completely de-cathect, detach, and mourn a highly-loved loss.<sup>8</sup> This may be what often gives Monk the feeling of being *haunted* by Trudy's death; always wrestling with his memory of the case of her murder, as well of her in general.

Whether this is Monk trying to repress the reality of her death or his inability to completely de-cathect, it clearly speaks to the pain involved in mourning, and the desire to not have to be without that which had previously been a source of life, love, and energy. There is a parallel in Freud's theory, then, in *all* losses and deaths, with a person's earliest losses (how early we may never know)—for example, mother's attention and care.<sup>9</sup>

Here we reach an important connection with anxiety. Recall that Freud hypothesized that anxiety based in traumatic neurosis was a mental preparation for an approaching perceived danger that had already happened. In Monk's case we have someone who is terrified that all the world's dirt, disorder, and confusion will overtake him. But, we *also* have someone whose *thoughts* are endlessly in disorder, and who is endlessly confused by the meaning of Trudy's death, and how to deal with it. It is highly significant that this is the one case Monk cannot solve, or "put in order." *Here* he is haunted.

### Repetition

He carries Trudy's loss around with him constantly; a hole in the world instead of a memory of loss. Until he is able to de-cathect her—that is, complete the process of mourning—he won't be able to move on with his life. Unable to transform the hole in the world into a memory, and unable to move forward until he does so, he is stuck where he is, and the only thing that his unconscious sees to do is to try to repeat the traumatic experience over and over again, until somehow he is able to stop it from happening. Impossible, of course: the mind can't change the world, no matter how much we wish it could, and we cannot change the past, but

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<sup>8</sup> See Jacques Derrida's *The Work of Mourning*, and *Specters of Marx*.

<sup>9</sup> And with this we come back to weaning, and what Jacques Lacan called "le petit objet 'a'." Perhaps we are closer to cracking the traumatic core of Monk's phobic milk fixation than we had at first thought . . .

the unconscious doesn't understand these basic facts about how the world works.

Adrian's anxiety dream in "Mr. Monk is On the Run (Part 1)," is a dramatic version of the kind of solution his mind is trying to find. He dreams he's watching Trudy get into the car. He tries to warn her, but she can't hear him, and as fast as he runs forward, he can get no closer. And then the inevitable end comes. By trying to return to the scene of the crime—but this time, *knowing what is going to happen*—his unconscious is attempting to experience the loss of Trudy as something he was prepared for. The problem, of course, is this: if he had really been prepared for it, he would have prevented it; but if he prevented it, it wouldn't have happened. How can you be psychologically prepared for the loss of your beloved? If she is your beloved, this means you have invested psychologically (cathected) in her as a love-object, and that means by definition that you are not prepared to walk away from her!

When Monk had anxiety around nudity, he was experiencing after the fact—remember, the unconscious does not understand how time works—the anxiety that would have made his frightful experience as an infant bearable; that would have made it merely *unpleasant* rather than traumatic. His unconscious is trying the same trick here, but in this case it is even more ineffective; for no amount of mental preparation, through anxiety, would have made her loss just "unpleasant."

Until he is able to finish the mourning process, and allow Trudy to be a person in the past that he merely *remembers*, her absence is the most glaring, obvious, and objectionable fact about the world. Until then, every time he straightens a set of blinds, evens out the amount of ink in two pens, or solves a murder, he is engaging in displacement behavior caused by his frustrated desire to fix that *one*, that *only* really important thing wrong with the world: that *she is not in it*.

### The Death Drive

Adrian Monk, it seems, always had his repetition compulsions and traumatic childhood neuroses, but it was with Trudy's death that these problems began to make him unable to function. At least three different things drive these compulsions, and the strength of all three, in congress, was almost enough to remove him from the world entirely.

The first, which we discussed using his fear of nudity, is the use of repetition to build the anxiety which would have shielded the psyche from past trauma; just like how children play games in order to re-enact and gain control over frightening events that they were subjected to. This set of compulsions and phobias presumably pre-existed Trudy's death and Monk's breakdown.

The second, as we have just discussed, is Monk's subsequent use of these compulsions and phobias as displacement behavior: following Trudy's death, it seems that Monk has unconsciously seized upon his pre-existing compulsions as a safe and satisfying way of "fixing" the world. By creating perfect order in every way under his control, he uses his compulsions as a proxy for creating order in the realm beyond his control; the realm of human value and meaning. The boxes in a perfect row stand in for the things out of place which *cannot* be put back in place—namely, that Trudy is no longer in the world. Through this displacement behavior, Monk is able to subvert and divert the process of mourning; the process by which he would otherwise be forced to recognize unconsciously what he knows consciously: that Trudy is gone.

There is, though, a third kind of impulse giving rise to Monk's repetition compulsions; contained within the other two and intensified by them, but more fundamental and universal than either. This is what Freud called the death drive. We have, he said, a basic instinct to flee from life. Life is dangerous, unstable, uncertain. It's a jungle out there. We always, in some way, wish we could leave it all behind. We wish we could just give up, let go, quit.

In children, we see this expressed in a basic fear of change and desire for repetition. Children repeat unpleasant experiences in order to gain mastery over those experiences, but they repeat pleasant experiences as well—and in a way that, in adults, seems neurotic and obsessive-compulsive. Children want to eat the same food at every meal. They want to hear the same jokes time and time again, and delight in them though they hold no surprise or novelty.<sup>10</sup> As Freud said,

if a child has been told a nice story, he will insist on hearing it over and over again rather than a new one; and he will remorselessly stip-

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<sup>10</sup> You might remember this one from "Mr. Monk and the Airplane:" Pete and Repete were on a boat. Pete fell off. Who was left?

ulate that the repetition shall be an identical one and will correct any alterations of which the narrator may be guilty—though they may actually have been made in the hope of gaining fresh approval. (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p. 42)

The desire for stability, certainty, and safety is a way of trying to protect oneself from having to move forward in time, having to change, and, generally, having to be alive.

As adults, when we have been hurt, are afraid, or wish otherwise to retreat from the world, we engage in this kind of childish repetition as well, and for the same reasons. So-called “comfort food,” for example, seems to consist of an exact replication of the highest-fat-content things eaten as a child. The troubled mind wishes to retreat to a stable past, safe from change, and so we obsessively seek to recreate exactly our past childish food-obsessions; the high-fat dishes presumably serve this function best because they bring about a physiological sluggishness that helps to further quiet the mind. Thanksgiving is perhaps the most conservative and fearful of our contemporary rituals: we return to our families, we eat the exact dishes eaten every year at this time (and only at this time), and then we collectively pass out in a bloated corpse-like torpor, aided by the mind-deadening effects of television and gravy. We eat to forget that life moves on; we eat until there’s no more room for uncertainty.

Even when we try to move forward, it seems that there is an impulse, sometimes almost demonic, to recreate and re-enact our history. As Freud points out, quoting Nietzsche, there is a kind of “perpetual recurrence of the same thing” (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p. 23), in which we seem to go through relationships with the same rhythm, phases and outcomes; “the benefactor who is abandoned in anger after a time by each of his *protégés*,” “the man whose friendships all end in betrayal by his friend,” or “the lover each of whose love affairs with a woman passes through the same phases and reaches the same conclusion.” Pessimistically and masochistically re-creating an expected and familiar bad fate has the advantage of freeing us from anxiety. We know how to suffer with the pain we choose for ourselves, and it’s safer, easier, and more comfortable to wallow in our distinctive misery than to risk the uncertainty of a life that may present us with fresh possibilities for both pleasure and pain. Monk’s distinct and comfortable misfortune seems to be abandonment, and he knows it, but still drives

others to repeat that fate again and again. He speaks of this many different times, but for example, in “Mr. Monk Gets Lotto Fever,” he says “I can’t blame Natalie for leaving. I’d leave me too if I had the chance,” and then, after Stottlemeyer wins the lottery and announces his immediate retirement, “Everybody leaves.” It’s hard not to think that he’s like the child who says “fort” and throws his toy away. If he can’t have his father and wife back—well, he’ll drive everyone else away as well. At least, then, he’s in control, and the pain will be a safe familiar pain.

In this way—in addition to being a reactive anxiety response, and a form of displacement behavior—Adrian’s repetitive-compulsive behavior is also clearly an intensified form of a universal desire to escape from the pressures and uncertainty of life itself. The death drive pulls us all towards stability and safety, but it pulls Adrian more so than most. And why not? The world has given him more trouble and loss than it gives to most.

This also gives Adrian his child-like qualities. Like a child, he is ready to insist that things be done a certain way. He makes everything his business. He is self-centered and self-serving—not because he is cruel or unkind, but because he is too busy trying to keep his environment stable and safe to be thoughtful about others. Nobody is allowed to touch him, but he can touch anything he likes if he sees it’s not in the order he would prefer.<sup>11</sup> He is a grown man who has chicken pot-pie Tuesdays.

### **The Strength to Mourn**

And so, Monk regresses to childhood security-blankets, experiences phobic obsessions, and engages in compulsive behavior in order to avoid moving forward in time, to avoid going through the mourning process which would allow his life to move forward without his lost wife. Certainly a healthier reaction than a psychotic break, but not really a sustainable way to live. Adrian is a tightly-strained bow—perhaps this is how his mind, his genius, has been

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<sup>11</sup> And Marc Zaffran is right when he says that we wish we could be such a self-indulgent childish genius! See Chapter 10 in this volume. Although Marc recognizes that there’s a humanitarian side to this as well, even if it gets obscured by the self-importance of Monk’s compulsions. As Monk put it, “I happen to believe that all men are brothers. Every man’s bent antenna diminishes me.” (“Mr. Monk Gets Cabin Fever”)

able to shoot his arrows of genius so far—but if he’s going to survive, he must find a way to loosen the tension.

There are two paths forward. Either he must solve Trudy’s murder, after which—knowing the answer to his motivating question, and able to some extent to understand the event that destroyed his world—he could cease to attempt to ‘fix’ the world through repetition-compulsions and instead go through the mourning process. Or he must give up on the demand for control and meaning and go through the mourning process, accepting that Trudy’s death will never make sense, and that the world simply isn’t the kind of thing that always makes sense. He might have to do this even if he solves the crime.

We should not demand of the writers of the series that he solve the crime. We should be happy for him if he is able to do so, but we should have faith that he may be able to find a path forward, and put his mind into order instead of putting the world into order, even if he does not. The sad truth is that many families of real murder victims have to live with loss that is *not* part of some larger story; either a random act of violence, accident, stray bullet, or unsolved crime. And, even if there is an answer to be found that might help it be more bearable, they do not have the experience, ability, or connections to solve their beloved’s crimes, unlike Mr. Monk.

While we should admire Monk’s resolve and will, we should admire at least as much the strength of those who are able to find a way to move forward in life—to find a way to care about and find value in the world again—without finding this kind of closure.