

IMPORTANT QUOTES from *Annihilation* Super Summary Study Guide (2020)

1. “There were four of us: a biologist, an anthropologist, a surveyor, and a psychologist. I was the biologist.” (Chapter 1, Page 3)

This sentence captures the compact, direct style of writing VanderMeer employs. Essential information is frequently delivered in simple and terse, but often elegant, sentences.

2. “The effect of this cannot be understood without being there. The beauty of it cannot be understood either, and when you see beauty in desolation it changes something inside you. Desolation tries to colonize you.” (Chapter 1, Page 5)

These lines capture the mood of the novel well; beauty and desolation often intertwine.

3. “I saw this in vast and intricate detail as we all stood there, and looking back, I mark it as the first irrational thought I had once we had reached our destination.” (Chapter 1, Page 7)

The narrator’s concern for whether her thoughts are rational or irrational speaks both to her conditioning and to the heightened level of watchfulness with which she must conduct herself while around the other expedition members. It also speaks to a certain level of distrust between them, which will ultimately erupt in violence.

4. “I lay awake in my tent for a while trying to turn the tower into a tunnel, or even a shaft, but with no success. Instead, my mind kept returning to a question: *What lies hidden at its base?*” (Chapter 1, Page 15)

This passage illustrates the narrator’s ability to see what others can’t as well as her tenacious inquisitiveness.

5. “But what is its *purpose*? And is it believable that it would not be on the maps? Could one of the prior expeditions have built and hidden it?” (Chapter 1, Page 23)

The narrator’s barrage of questions for the anthropologist when they first enter the tower foreshadows the large number of questions that she will have about Area X as she ventures deeper into her journey.

6. “The air was so clean, so fresh, while the world back beyond the border was what it had always been during the modern era: dirty, tired, imperfect, winding down, at war with itself.” (Chapter 1, Page 30)

The narrator signals her preference for natural habitats over synthetic ones—even the natural habitats of Area X—in many ways throughout the novel, including in this passage.

7. ““You will retain a memory of having discussed several options with regard to the tunnel. You will find that you ultimately agreed with me about the best course of action, and that you felt quite confident about this course of action.” (Chapter 1, Page 32)

The biologist witnesses the psychologist hypnotizing the other members of the expedition in a more thorough manner than she previously assumed, while simultaneously learning that one effect of the spores is that she is suddenly immune to such hypnosis.

8. ““Where is the anthropologist?” the surveyor demanded, while I hung back, trying to make my own sense of it.” (Chapter 2, Page 37)

The beginning of Chapter 2 begins in dramatic fashion, with the anthropologist missing from base camp. The surveyor deals with the information by asking the psychologist directly what has happened, while the narrator processes the disappearance in a more subtle, private, and skeptical way.

9. ““You can’t see what is there, I thought.” (Chapter 2, Page 42)

This passage points to a central tension and conflict between the narrator and the surveyor. The narrator is privy to a reality that the surveyor cannot see, but since the surveyor is a strict pragmatist, she chooses to believe the narrator is losing her rationality rather than trust her visions of this other reality.

11. ““The man who had been a passionate sailor, and for two weeks out of the year went with friends to the coast to go boating. I could find none of that in him now.” (Chapter 2, Page 57)

After the narrator’s husband returns from the 11th expedition, he is a greatly changed person: he seems blank and devoid of his spark of life.

12. ““Believe me or don’t believe me,” I said. “But believe this: When we go up there, we need to be ready for anything. We may need to restrain or kill the psychologist because we don’t know what she’s planning.” (Chapter 2, Page 64)

This passage illustrates the tensions that exist between the three remaining expedition members after the anthropologist’s death. The surveyor doesn’t trust the narrator, while the narrator is suspicious of the psychologist, who might prove to be a murderer or traitor.

13. ““You prefer this place, you really do, don’t you?” the surveyor said.” (Chapter 2, Page 70)

This is the first of many hints that the narrator is adapting well to the environs of Area X—so well, in fact, that she’ll ultimately choose to remain there at the novel’s end.

14. “This was really the only thing I discovered in him after his return; a deep and unending solitude, as if he had been granted a gift that he didn’t know what to do with. A gift that was poison to him and eventually killed him. But would it have killed me?” (Chapter 2, Page 82)

This question—would it have killed me?—might be one of the motivating questions of the entire novel and a main reason why the narrator chooses to volunteer for the 12th expedition into Area X.

15. “But in what had been kitchens or living rooms or bedrooms, I also saw a few peculiar eruptions of moss or lichen, rising four, five, feet tall, misshapen, the vegetative matter forming an approximation of limbs and heads and torsos.” (Chapter 3, Page 96)

In one of the eerier images in the novel, the narrator here witnesses what seem to be the transformation of human beings into moss, or the opposite: moss into human beings.

16. “My sole gift or talent, I believe now, was that places could impress themselves upon me, and I could become a part of them with ease.” (Chapter 3, Page 110)

Not only does this sentence describe the narrator’s personal orientation towards the world, but also it suggests a theme running through the entire novel: the incorporation of organisms into their surrounding environments.

17. “‘Annihilation!’ she shrieked at me, flailing in confusion. ‘Annihilation! Annihilation!’ The word seemed more meaningless the more she repeated it, like the cry of a bird with a broken wing.” (Chapter 4, Page 124)

It is revealed later that the word “Annihilation” is a hypnotic command that the psychologist possesses and that is meant to induce suicide in the hearer.

18. “A wet chuckle, a mocking tone. ‘Of course you’re not. You’re just becoming more of what you’ve always been. And I’m not changing, either. None of us are changing. Everything is fine. Let’s have a picnic.’” (Chapter 4, Page 127)

Nearing death, the psychologist manages to evince some wit. Although she remains enigmatic for much of the novel, certain characteristics, such as her wit, prove she also might have had a vulnerable side.

19. “It was coming so fast, too fast, I could tell I wasn’t going to make it, couldn’t possibly make it, not at that angle, but I was committed now.” (Chapter 4, Page 142)

This sentence is a representative sample of the action writing that is prevalent in the novel. Here the narrator runs headlong into conflict with the moaning creature of the reeds.

20. “What if there was a purpose for her in this place? Would burying her circumvent an ability to change that might belong to her, even now?” (Chapter 4, Page 148)

The narrator displays an ability to think as a part of her environment rather than as separate from it. Here she thinks holistically about the process of the surveyor’s body incorporating back into the habitat.

21. “Out back, I saw what the surveyor had added to the old graveyard: an empty, newly dug grave with a mound of dirt out to the side—and stabbed into the ground, a simple cross made from fallen branches.” (Chapter 4, Page 153)

When the narrator makes it back to base camp, there is evidence that the surveyor has lost her grip on reality to some extent. In addition to digging graves, she has also destroyed samples and wasted food.

22. “I’ll follow the shoreline as far as I can go. To the island, and perhaps beyond. If you ever read this, that is where I am going. That is where I will be.” (Chapter 5, Page 168)

The narrator’s husband writes in his journal about his plans to survive and continue on into Area X. The narrator is proud of her husband’s bravery.

23. “You understand, I could no more have turned back than have gone back in time. My free will was compromised.” (Chapter 5, Page 172)

There are several instances in the novel when it seems the narrator is not merely acting according to her own will but is in fact at the mercy of some greater—perhaps natural—will. One such moment is during her last descent into the tower in Chapter 5.

24. “It was the most agony I have ever been in, as if a metal rod had been repeatedly thrust into me and then the pain distributed like a second skin inside the contours of my outline.” (Chapter 5, Page 181)

The narrator endures violent pain to satisfy her curiosity about what secrets the tunnel hides.

25. “Before she died, the psychologist said I had changed, and I think she meant I had *changed sides*.” (Chapter 5, Page 192)

In the fight between natural and synthetic, Area X and the old world, the past and the present, perhaps the narrator has indeed switched sides by the end of the novel and now chooses to explore the natural habitat that Area X represents rather than rejoin the world of cities she seems to despise.