

The Origin of the Oniare

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Abstract

“The Origin of the Oniare” is a fictional tale of the realistic issue of agricultural and urban runoff that pollutes the Susquehanna river. The story follows the events of a sea monster, the Oniare (a legendary creature that lived originally in Lake Ontario), terrorizing residents of a river town located in the Susquehanna area, and destroying the environment around the river by killing off everything living in the town. To create this feeling of terror and death to the environment which people often believe is caused by an eternal force, I turned to the apocalyptic style of Rachel Carson and the view of nature being an Avengeful Angel from William Cronon to construct the character of the Oniare. Carson and Cronon also used a kind of creative writing approach similar to the Oniare story as all writers took an environmental issue, and applied it to a narrative or of a metaphorical sense of what can and is happening to the ecosystem. The point of the Oniare story is to emphasize the importance of pollution awareness before it is too late. The story also illustrates the importance of understanding that societies and communities are all held accountable for the causes and effects of pollution in rivers, such as the Susquehanna, and is not sparked by an individual occurrence like a polluting sea monster.

All the legends have stated that the Great Lakes were the first and only waters it resided and terrorized in. Folklore describes the way it slithered and lurked below the naïve current, which carry a ship right to it. On a silver platter, they always came full of ambitious and idiotic passengers who never stop to take a look around at what was silently skulking below the surface of the water. It is rumored to attack too quick for any ship to react. In the aftermath of the bloody massacre, all that is left of them are a few planks or limbs and a faint hissing that can be heard in the distance. The nature of the murderous attacks all the storytellers and fables got correct, but the Great Lakes were

not the original victims of this demonic beast. Before it travelled to the Lakes, or the bays of Nova Scotia, even in the shallows of the Chesapeake Bay, it first slaughtered on the banks of my river town of Marietta. The Susquehanna River, the blue heart of my Marietta, was the first to inhabit the Oniare.

Marietta became a fearful shell of its original self when it first came to our shores. Anglers became its comfort food. Children and animals were dragged from their mothers as they had taken a step too close to its watery territory. The fight to stay alive was, at that time, our town’s most popular

occupation. We were no longer a town, but a scared pack of defenseless prey who waited for the predator to sink its fangs into all of us. Everyone, including my parents, felt powerless and that we were far beyond saving ourselves from the monster. It tried to poison us, dismember us, and almost ate us all alive until one day it unexpectedly vanished.

One day, one of the farmers, who was drunk and scared, tried to sacrifice itself to the Oniare as he could not take the fatal anticipation any longer. He waited for hours in the frigid waters and nothing happened. He emerged alive and unharmed the next day, but no one believed him. Over the next week, the man returned to the river and swam for hours, each time emerging unharmed. The beast was finally gone. The river townspeople rejoiced with relief. As time began to move on, the Susquehanna became the heart of Marietta again instead of the beast's stomach. We began to cast our lines once more, sat by the shore, and even dared to dip our toes in every once in a while. We all had been freed by the clutches of it. It finally ended, though, only for the time being.

While the river townsfolk cheered and splashed in the river, others were not so keen for a celebration. One of the others, a light skinned man of distant Iroquois descent who goes by the name Hannon, says we are just in its yellow eye of the storm. He was the farmer who was the first to emerge from the river unharmed and proved that the Oniare was far away from our Susquehanna shores. The Oniare was gone, he stated, but it had foretold a warning to him in the water. The river tides dried up and showed Hannon the horrors that lies beneath the water. Although the beast had receded, Hannon believed it would return again with great vengeance and anger that nothing around the

river will survive, including us. We are all destined to an aquatic grave, he said, if we give it enough lethal reason to come back. If it does return, he continued, it will bathe in the river of our blood and scatter our bones onto the river's shores. The last thing we would see is its deadly yellow eyes and all that shall be left of us is the hissing reminder that we did not listen to its warning. The day may come when the Oniare returns to dig a graveyard with its fangs. It was all just folklore at that point, and Hannon was just another crazy storyteller engulfed in the legend. I never thought the legend would come alive decades later in my life.

After it vanished, I, like most of the young river folk, grew up with a naïve perception of the Oniare. We believed that the Oniare was truly gone forever as that is what our parents and elders brought us up to believe. We had heard that it made its way up to the Great Lakes by water canals and was terrorizing the towns up near Lake Ontario or Lake Erie. It was the Northern Penns' worries now, my mother and father used to say, it has finally left our shores for another. It is true that it left our shores, but no one knows quite why it had gone in the first place. Some have said it was driven out by some kind of Spirit sent to free us from its deadly grasp. Others said there was a bad storm once and it swept it all the way to the northern waters of the States. A few believed it was hurt or killed somehow and decays at the bottom of the river. All these stories cannot hold a candle to Hannon's.

He warned anyone who crossed his path of the horrific day the Oniare would return, even if they did not wish to speak to him. Once a great farmer who bred cattle, Hannon sold all of his livestock and farmland to please the Oniare. He said the Oniare told him that his farm and others' in Marietta would be the reason of its return to

our town to finish us off. The farmers, including myself and my family, dismissed his warnings as being completely insane. After the farmers would not believe him, he cornered the youths in the streets and preached the evil nature of farm families. I once saw him corner a pack of children outside the Waldolf School on Walnut and began screaming about at those whose families owned farms were the foreseeing cause of the Oniare's return. He spoke of how he could still hear the Oniare whispering warnings in his ears from miles away. The warnings were along the lines of the monster will slaughter not only the river, but the land that the people stand on. The monster lurks in the water and the soil beneath us and this will be the cause of the Oniare's fatal return. Everyone knew from a young age never to trust a word Hannon said and his "Iroquois eyesight" that he believed would allow himself to see into the future. It just appeared to be another delusion concocted in his delirious head. Some used to say it was the bottle that made him crazy. Others said it was the pipe. Most just believed that craziness was just in his blood. He was the same insane man who tried to sacrifice himself more than once to the creature and ever since has babbled about hearing and seeing the Oniare in the river. The Oniare was gone and the river was fine and safe for the first time in the history of Marietta.

The trout and catfish came back in more schools than one can imagine. Angling was once again a thriving occupation. Our beloved Marietta even began to draw in a touristy crowd as people described the Susquehanna as a "shining river." The Oniare became a distant memory as it was replaced with tourist attractions, water sports, and more farms sprouting up closer to the river. My father, a born and raised dairy farmer, even bought a nice patch of

land down by the river to expand his successful dairy business. So I became naïve to the river's history as I grew up jumping without hesitation into the river and basking in it for hours. The Oniare became a folklore we would tell little children or eager tourists hanging off of every word. The story became distorted over the years. The Oniare became a nine-headed dragon that breathed fire or a Bigfoot-like creature that could eat a hundred-foot tree in one bite. As I grew older and eventually became the oldest member in my family, the Oniare was just a bad memory and only lived in the legends we would tell others by the river. The day would soon come when the story came alive once again, but we made ourselves ignore the initial warning signs.

As years went by, slowly our paradise by the river began to descend back into hell. The shining river began to turn brown and grew darker each day. The dead fish began to cover the brown river like a blanket. Tourists and locals alike began to grow ill as the fish became fatal and the anglers began to disappear once more. The beautiful oak trees shriveled up while the fruit from the paw paw trees turned sour and soon poisonous. Farm animals vanished from our acres and were eventually found dead in the river. All the water soon after became poisonous and we had to import bottled water from mainland towns.

My land, like others, began to become barren and unfertile. It got to a point that even a small flood would send the town into chaos as we tried to protect what healthy land we had left. This did not just effect Marietta. Columbia, Wrightsville, and many other river towns became watery graveyards due to the growing toxins from the water. At first, we tried to dismiss it through natural causes, but soon many believed that it had come back. The beast

had come back as it was foretold by the late Hannon, a man who claimed to see and hear the Oniare through the drops of the river, whom we ultimately dismissed. We all braced ourselves for the monster's return, to finish what it had left behind. The farmers killed their animals to use as meat before the Oniare came for them as a snack. Mothers smothered their babies in their sleep to save them, as they feared the beast had gone beyond the confines of the river and was now treading on land to finish us. It was in the trees, the water, the soil, and it was in the town. We waited and waited and braced for it all. Eventually, nothing came.

No monster or beast like creature ever emerged from the bowels of the river. Though we waited, it never came back, at least in creature form. Like most river towns, Marietta soon became only faint ruins of what life was once like there. The remaining river folk abandoned their farms and flocked to the main lands once the river turned black along with all the drinking water around us. I tried to stay near the river as long as possible, trying hard not to believe that the monster had come back as Hannon predicted to everyone when I was a child, but eventually that was all I could think about. I still do not know why I stayed so long, maybe to see if would truly come back or maybe to see if this was all real or just a terrible nightmare. I would sit on a small hill by the river, gazing at the black abyss that was the oasis of most of my life.

On one of the last days I lived in Marietta, I heard something that spoke in unison with the river's current. It was soft at first, only a faint whisper, almost a hiss, but it grew louder. It began to yell, but only felt like I could hear what it was saying as nothing else around me seemed disturbed by it. I listened to the current and it slowly summoned me in like sirens calling to a

ship. The voice lingered for hours and I thought this was how it would kill me. The Oniare never sunk its lethal fangs into my flesh, it only opened its mouth to speak into my ear. It told me to listen to every drop of black water and every wave crashing over rocks that surrounded me. The Oniare told me that it had returned, but not as a monster. The Oniare may have left, but the monster never did. The beast then fell silent and the river began to recede. The black waters began to go dry and then I saw it. I saw my cattle, our neighbors' corn and poultry, the fertilizer, I saw all of it. It showed me through its yellow eyes that the Oniare of the river was not here to murder us all, but to show us how we have already slaughtered ourselves.

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