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### Chum by Earl Sweatshirt: An Analysis

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### Chum by Earl Sweatshirt

Earl Sweatshirt is one of Hip-Hop's most intriguing rappers to date. He has managed to build up a dedicated and almost cult-like fan base. Upon inspecting his discography, it's very easy to see how this was executed. Things like his vivid descriptions of his personal thoughts/life, highly imaginative metaphors, and the sinister dark aesthetic to Earl's overall sound. One song that carries out these and other traits is one of his first singles "Chum". After multiple listens, the song's many layers should start becoming recognizable to listeners. These same layers have complexities that never stop getting intricate.

Before getting into the song, Earl's background should be touched on because it does actually have a role in the song's lyrics. Earl Sweatshirt was born under the name Thebe Neruda Kgositsile and raised by both of his parents. Earl's parents are also pretty interesting as his mother was taught at UC, meanwhile his father was the famous South African political poet Keorapetse Kgositsile (Bein). Unfortunately though, Earl's father left him very early on in Earl's life which would affect him forever. Later on, he joined the California-based rap group Odd Future which included other talents such as: Tyler the Creator, Frank Ocean, etc. For a majority of the group's peak, Earl was not present because he had been sent away to a Samoa boarding school by his mother to help reform the young troubled Earl Sweatshirt (Songfacts). During this

hiatus, his audience eagerly waited and demanded for new music from the rapper.

This song Chum served as Earl's first message to his new audience. It was the first song he released since returning from his Samoa journey, and it was much more reflective and retrospective in comparison to his earlier work. A lot is addressed in the song's lyrics as Earl opens up the first verse by stating, "*It's probably been 12 years since my father left, left me fatherless/And I just used to say I hate him in dishonest jest/When honestly I miss this nigga, like when I was six/And every time I got the chance to say it I would swallow it*". Writer Erica Vanneste shares her simple viewpoint on these lyrics by stating, "Sweatshirt discusses his personal experiences with abandonment on "Chum"..." (Vanneste 6). These first lines aim directly at the subject of his father's absence from his life. It starts the verse off sounding very reflective as he goes from hating his father for leaving, to now missing his father more than he would usually admit. Another noteworthy line would be when Earl raps, "*Too black for the white kids, and too white for the blacks,*" later in the verse. Joel Rubin, writer for the Journal of Hip-Hop Studies, explains the line saying, "With anxiety surrounding difference and definition, the assertion and preservation of blackness are at the heart of post-regional black identity formation. The struggle becomes that of maintaining authenticity and is best exemplified in spatial resistance" (Rubin). Rubin highlights that Earl is expressing issues by not fitting into either the stereotypical black or white crowds, and Earl has found it hard staying authentic to his true self because of these stereotypes; despite being proud and accepting of his black ethnicity.

The most memorable lyrics in the song come enter when Earl spits, "*Tolerance for boundaries, I know you happy now/Craven and these Complex fuck niggas done track me down/Just to be the guys that did it, like, "I like attention"/Not the type where niggas trying to get a*

*raise at my expense.*” These lyrics were a response to the popular media platform “Complex” after they revealed that Earl Sweatshirt was sent to a boarding school while Odd Future first blew up, as previously mentioned. Earl clearly did not like this and addresses the subject in an angry tone while rapping the lines. He even gets sarcastic at one point by joking claiming he ‘likes attention’, but then follows it up convey that he took offense to Complex revealing his whereabouts because they were simply getting clicks off of his personal life. In short, the lyrics in Chum are extremely dark, gloomy, reflective, and angry at some points.

The complexity of Earl’s lyrics go even further when you look at how exactly he is rapping them. Erica Vanneste puts it best when she expressed, “Earl’s stream-of-consciousness style lyrics are supported by darker beats and synth influence...” (Vanneste 6). The stream-of-consciousness like flow Vanneste is referring to can be described as being very monotone and sounding like a run-on sentence at times. Earl himself has admitted to getting this style of flow and delivery from legendary underground rapper MF Doom. Many would write off his delivery as being boring, but when more thought is put behind it, it is very easy to see that Earl matches his depressing lyrics with a monotone rapping style. It comes across as blunt, moody, and cut throat as the lyrics themselves as well. Earl tends to rap a lot about his own personal experiences and feelings, so his flow being so “stream-of-consciousness-like” makes sense because he is giving the audience a glimpse at the running thoughts in his mind. In addition, the flow manages to stay on beat and kind of off kilter. This is due to some points of the song having a “stop and go” type of flow.

He also tends to start metaphors off at the end of one line then finish them in the start of

the very next one. A good example of this is when he raps in the song's chorus, "Something sinister to it, pendulum swinging slow/A degenerate moving through the city with criminals, stealth." Here, Earl starts the wordplay off with the end of the first line, "pendulum swinging slow." That is connected to the first part of the second line, "A degenerate moving," since a pendulum would be considered degenerate in physics; which is because friction slows a pendulum down. Earl essentially uses the word "degenerate" in that way, but also as a way to describe a cruel person roaming a city of criminals. Earl truly shows his lyrical prowess and dexterity well in the song with everything mentioned above.

The musical backings of Chum can be described as being menacing and demented. The beat features a very punchy kick and dusty snares that give that "old-school" feel. The drum pattern is very repetitive along with the sampled piano melody that occurs throughout the song. Professional writers Russ Hepworth-Sawyer & Jay Hodgson explain the importance of the repeated piano melody, "Samples can also, however, offer a track with recurring harmonic and melodic content. This is exemplified by the piano sample that plays throughout "Chum"..." (Hodgson & Hepworth-Sawyer 173). Chum's sampled melody is one of the defining features that gives the song its dark aesthetic due to the melody being in a minor scale. The bass line of the instrumental has a very deep sub, but also has a very slightly distorted sound. Earl's voice and lyrics match the beat of the song because both match the darkness of the beat. In addition, Earl's delivery that was previously mentioned above and the production make him sound like a depressed person stuck in their dark twisted mind; the beat representing his dark thoughts.

Furthermore, the song Chum also features an instrumental outro that sounds nothing like

the rest of the song. The beat switch in a way is almost the polar opposite to the song's main instrumental. The outro's instrumental kicks off with a "rock and roll" drum pattern of just a snare and kick, but they differ from the drums of the main beat because they sound more acoustic. Multiple retro synthesizers then start to roar in over top of the drum pattern. These synths specifically are very commonly used in Earl's other Odd Future contemporaries' music, and they provide a more upbeat vibe along with the drums. The beat then progresses with the addition of distant percussion sounds being added in the middle of the outro. Earl chooses to not rap a single line over the outro's instrumental, and chooses for it to end by slowly fading out. Lastly, this creative choice to have an upbeat outro to a dark song is truly a beautiful contrast.

Chum is probably one of the best examples of Earl Sweatshirt's overall sound and output. Earl himself maybe even felt this way himself since he put this out as the first single off his debut album *Doris*. Typically, singles are meant to get fans excited for new music and give them a sneak peek at what the rest of the album will sound like. Furthering this point, the rest of the album does have similar elements to Chum such as: dark instrumentals, creative metaphors, personal lyrics, incredibly purposeful flows, etc. His albums "I Don't Like Sh\*t, I Don't Go Outside" and "Some Rap Songs", both released after Chum and *Doris*, have some distinct stylistic differences from *Doris*. However, they're both just evolved and enhanced versions of Earl's artistry on *Doris*; they still contain the core depressing elements that make Chum and *Doris* such standouts in the Hip-Hop genre.

Odd Future, Earl's former music group he was apart of, have been mentioned in this essay multiple times. To elaborate more, they are very important to the song Chum and Earl as an artist. The group received mainstream attention due to many controversies that Erica

Vanneste explains, “Earl Sweatshirt and Odd Future as a group have received criticism for the often vulgar and violent nature of their lyrics—it can be shocking; it’s part of their sound and image and Doris does not stray far from that mode” (Vanneste 6). Aside from controversial lyrics, the group’s music shared other similar aspects to each other. Every artist in Odd Future got most of their instrumentals from producers in the camp. When comparing Chum to Tyler the Creator's music, one of Odd Future’s premiere acts, you’ll start to notice similar aspects in their production. Tyler, Earl and even other members’ music have similar sounds such as melancholy instrumentals, cheap pianos, weird retro synths, and others. These are all elements that the song Chum has, thus furthering how Odd Future essentially had their own sound that Earl was a part of.

To end off, the context of the song should be highlighted. Earl writes very personal lyrics in Chum that detail his sinister experiences and the mind of a depressed young man. The purpose seems to be because writing about these things is therapeutic for Earl, but it is equally very reasonable to believe that Earl writes lyrics like these for an audience that can relate to them. It’s very clear that Earl is depressed based on his lyrics and experiences, and anyone relating to them are also more than likely depressed and/or relate to these dark things in other ways. The goal of writing songs like Chum is to let the audience that relates to these words know that they're not the only ones going through these things. This is because it can be very comforting knowing that you're not alone in your struggle; showing that Earl cares about his fanbase.

Besides that, another purpose of writing the song Chum is that he had to update his older and newer fans. As mentioned before, the song served as Earl’s first release since being on a hiatus while Odd Future was blowing up. The lyrics show where Earl is at in his life now

mentally. An example of this would be when he's reflecting on his relationship with his father. Earl also manages to discuss his opinion on Complex exposing his whereabouts while on his hiatus. Most seemed satisfied after finally hearing Earl's long-awaited message to the world.

Overall, it is very easy to see why Chum by Earl Sweatshirt is an important song for the genre. The song is extremely well executed and has dark, personal and poetic themes. Any song can express those things, but not many are done as uniquely as Chum. Between Earl's dynamic lyricism and well-structured melancholy production, the song is amazing upon deep analysis and casual listening. In conclusion, Chum is an example of a beautifully complex piece of Hip-Hop music.



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