

## **What we choose is what we are: the Choice of Food in Jim Crace's the Devil's Larder**

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### **Abstract**

Eating is a fundamental human activity, and food has always been a necessary part of daily life. In addition to being essential for one's survival, food is inextricably linked with one's identity, belief, socioeconomic status, and culture. This article examines Jim Crace's *The Devil's Larder*, a cumulative novel with sixty-four collections of stories that explores how one's choices of food preferences actually impact their identity and culture in both their personal and professional life. It reflects a series of societal and individual changes that have occurred throughout one's lifetime, many of which have been quite radical. The central significance of food and eating, as well as its many connotations, necessitates a connection to cultural materialism, which is concerned with the turbulence and creativity brought on by a radical conception of food and culture as well as the social negotiations expressed through the medium of food, especially its role in social etiquette, familial interactions, commercial relations, and social exchanges.

**Keywords:** Food, Identity, Belief, Socioeconomics, Culture.

Food permeates every aspect of a human being. It is an integral part of how humans construct their identities, like clothing, customs, and religious beliefs. They reveal a lot about humans as individuals, cultures, and societies through not only what they eat but also when they eat, how it is prepared, consumed, and why. A blueprint of a culture's collective identities is necessary to understand how it nourishes its members. According to Massimo Montanari, food is culturally significant in three contexts: during production, man creates his own food; during preparation, the produced food undergoes a technological transformation; and during consumption, the nutritional values of the food are linked to symbolic values.

The term "History of British Literature" refers to the evolution of literary and writing techniques over time in British literature. One of the burgeoning genres of literature is food literature. It is a fact that the inclusion of food in novels, poems, plays, and literary essays gives a much more realistic representation of everyday life. Jim Crace is a British novelist best known for writing realistic fiction with unique plots and detailed descriptions that have been translated into twenty-six languages. *The Devil's Larder*, his seventh novel, was published in 2001. It is a cumulative novel that contains sixty-four collections of stories that can be divided into two categories: personal and professional life based on food. The novel's entire subject was examined through the theory of cultural materialism.

Marvin Harris developed his cultural materialism paradigm in *The Rise of Anthropological Theory*, published in 1968 and 2001. According to this theory, social and cultural patterns are thought to have developed as a result of practical concerns for survival. Cultural materialism, which emerged as an extension of Marxist materialism, explains cultural similarities and differences as well as models for cultural change within a societal framework that consists of three distinct levels: an "infrastructure" of production and reproduction; a culture-based "structure" for economics and politics; and a "superstructure" of mental and behavioural expressions. In *The Devil's Larder*, the stories that centre on the family and its members fall under the category of personal life. It elicits the emotions associated with food, such as nostalgia, grief, poverty, and so on, which cause a change in a family's food culture. The stories about restaurants, supermarkets, parties, business gatherings, etc. are covered in the category of professional life, which focuses on the gimmicks, tactics, efforts, demonstrations, and other various techniques used in edibles for financial gain; in other words, it exemplifies commercial culture and a materialistic way of life.

Naturally, one requires food for sustenance, but at the same time, they are inundated with food knowledge and literacy largely through television, especially The Food Network, cookbooks, magazines, newspapers, restaurant guides, and finally, to a lesser extent, the Internet, which has

been a source of learning about food and food trends apart from one's family and will be taken up later in their food-related practices. In other words, one is surrounded by the smells, tastes, and sights of food, and it is inevitable, whether they consciously consider it or not. According to sociologist Claude Fischler, "food not only nourishes but also signifies" (276). The literary theorist, Terry Eagleton, adds, "[it] is never just food---it is endlessly interpretable---materialised emotion" (204). Food is therefore closely associated with one's memories and history. So, even though food is everywhere, one's past food experiences can shape one's identity. Each of the following passages in this article deals with a different story about food choices in personal and professional life in terms of culture and materialism.

The narrative centres on a grandmother's fond memories of baking bread with the very same dough that her grandchildren had first tasted. In the absence of her grandchildren, who live too far away, the grandmother does not bake any bread. Instead, she keeps herself occupied with other activities rather than cooking in order to distract herself from the nostalgic memories of her grandchildren. Despite her love of nature and the plants, she grew up with in the yard and on the windowsills, she mostly ate packets, cans, or frozen food because she was dissatisfied with cooking only for herself. It demonstrates her dissatisfaction with cooking and eating when her grandchildren stopped being present, which led her to opt for unhealthy ready-made foods. Despite her advanced age, the variety of food depicts the change in the food culture that she went through from the presence to the absence of her grandchildren.

The common appetite of the five strangers brought them together in this story. They are looking for a reputable restaurant that is located in the interior, close to the hills. They would like to consume a new and unique dish that elevates the taste boundaries. They became dull as a result of the path they took through the forest, and they even lost their appetites. It made them feel that they were being punished for their desire to eat. Their preference is for a reputable restaurant and the new and distinct flavour of the food over its location and health advantages, which is an indication of shifting cultural trends in eating habits. The choice of food for the five strangers is to get over their differences in taste, which caused them to struggle in the forest.

Dinner is the last of the three main meals of the day. Even though many people have learned the health benefits of eating a substantial breakfast and gradually reducing their caloric intake throughout the day in recent years, dinner remains the most crucial meal that carries considerable weight. In the story, the narrator gives advice on what to eat in the dark. Food that is hot rather than cold is the preferred option when it is dark outside, as the steam from the food helps to warm the night. He stated that one must enjoy it before the steam goes out, which makes one feel satisfied and

also aids in the slow digestion of the night. It falls under the category of diet culture because eating cold food at night makes one weigh more, whereas eating hot food at night makes it easier to digest. The aroma of steam is energising for the mind, and the hot food at night aids in weight loss for a healthy lifestyle. It shows that one must choose food on the basis of time and natural changes in order to be healthy.

The story of the two children who came for a picnic with their family was surprised to see a different kind of fruit on the farm that they had not seen in the garden or on the shelves of the supermarket, which made them eager to obtain that fruit. Those fruits were split apart due to their bitterness after they had been pulled and consumed. They proceeded to eat and enjoy the meals that were packed in the flask, plastic container, and tin that were served effortlessly to them by their mother. Thus, the children chose to eat and enjoy the packet food that they are accustomed to by ignoring the fresh and natural food. This demonstrates the transition from healthy eating habits to an unhealthy food culture.

The main idea of the story is that the resident manager prefers to serve hygienic food to the visitors. He imposed various rules for the waiters who deliver food, such as whistling when carrying a food tray and even when returning with an empty tray, carrying a tray to a specific room, and he carried the tray himself to the tables. Even though self-service is popular and in line with democratic principles, he abandoned that plan because he believed it would not be acceptable to the businessmen who frequently visited his place. This exemplifies materialism, which is the segregation of the wealthy and the poor. Though his rules and plans are unsuccessful, he is ultimately left with the option of trusting his waiter. His efforts convey the message of hygiene that he wishes to inculcate in his residents, and the choice of food is based on the hygiene culture that he maintains in his hotel.

Anna, an elderly woman in the story, is unconcerned about her food choices. The young neighbour advised her to stay away from allergenic foods like aubergines because they are expensive because of their aesthetic value rather than their nutritional value, and other high-fat toxic foods include pickles, citrus fruits, bananas, fat milk and cheese, red meat, green meat, tomatoes, coffee, chocolate, shore fish, cheap wine, and rhubarb. Anna was strongly opposed to her young neighbour's viewpoint. Even though she gets rid of a few things, she cannot get over her fondness for aubergines. As soon as she spots aubergines in the store, she completely forgets about her allergy and the harm it has done to her. The choice of food is based on its shiny and beautiful appearance rather than its health benefits. People are drawn to foods that appeal to their eyes

without considering the toxic effects. This is a reflection of the changes in food culture, in which even the elderly is easily and willingly tempted.

A carbonated beverage that makes people laugh is a central theme in the scientist's tale. He created it in order to become wealthy, but it was in vain. Even though it is beneficial to one's health to laugh, nobody likes to laugh aloud in front of other people. Despite the fact that certain foods have health benefits, people choose them based on their social position because they want to come across as dignified rather than foolish. It demonstrates how the culinary landscape is evolving toward commercialization.

Manac beans is the star of the story. It is a staple food for those in lower socioeconomic status, such as pensioners, farmers, the poor, and livestock. According to a radio report, manac beans are said to help treat infertility and impotence, which has made them popular among the wealthy. A single report changed the food of the poor into the food of the rich. The choice and status of the food are both varied in a radio report, demonstrating the influence of media culture as well as the materialism of manac beans among all socioeconomic classes.

A refugee girl is the central character of the story, whose job is to deliver food and collect the plates. There are no other options for her food besides the leftovers from room service. It demonstrates the level of poverty she experienced as a refugee in society, as well as the eating practices of the wealthy, who left some food on their plates because it was thought to be part of their prestigious culture. As a result, it depicts both the rich culture and the materialism of the rich and poor: "In the closing hours of the night, when it is quiet, she has to tour the seventh floor, collecting trays and crockery and anything that's left outside the rooms. There's always bread for her to eat and untouched vegetables, sometimes a piece of meat or cheese, some fries, some long-cold soup" (29).

The plot revolves around a family that makes an effort to plan their food for the various seasons. In their prosperous times, the family's food choices included eggs with a guarantee printed on the boxes. When times were tough, the family divided their egg production more evenly between the rainy and slow winter months and made their food selections based on climate and availability. They maintained economic balance throughout the year by utilising the food reserves they kept for survival. This reflects the materialistic lifestyle and poverty of the family.

The story's characters are a young couple who enjoy the life of hunting and eating in a cottage they rented on the coast for a week. They did not buy enough provisions, and the village was far from the coast, so they chose to hunt and cook for a week. They had a good time, and their entertainment

was food and fire. Their preferred cuisine is flame-cooked food, which they consider to be delicious to eat. When they were about to move from that place after a week, Rosa, the wife, took some nuts, blackberries, and some edible roots, plants, and herbs with her. The culture of stone-age man is defined by their decision to live in harmony with nature, as well as in their high regard for the freshness of the food they hunted and harvested.

The plot revolves around the banker's commercial gain strategies at the party. Though there was little demand for pasta, the banker's party trick of singing out the names of the ninety different types of pasta in alphabetical order in three minutes amused the visitors and encouraged them to eat them. In this case, the choice of food is based on the advertisement or the amusement of the party-goers, which falls under the commercial culture of the parties, which is a popular culture among young people.

The story of the mother and two daughters, in the note of nostalgia, brings out the economic status of the family. The mother used to bake a blind pie for her daughter's birthday. The trick and surprise of her mother for her daughter's birthday is that the birthday child is permitted to select the filling for all of the pies other than the blind one. Everyone at the table will be eagerly awaiting the blind pie to receive the unexpected gift. The wealthy will stuff the blind pie with a necklace or a marble, but their financial situation made their mother stuff it with flour and dry beans. The second daughter baked the blind pie on her mother's birthday in memory of her mother after she passed away. They enjoy the food because it provokes their curiosity, but their choice of food is determined by their materialism-based economic situation.

The father is the main character of the story, who teaches the techniques of fruit selling to his son. He used the phrase "also known as" to insert a new name beneath the real name of the fruit in the display card, which attracted the customers and caused them to run out of stock. Here, the selection of foods is based on names that suggest royalty, such as "Pygmy Oranges" and "King Quats," giving the impression that those fruits are popular among the wealthy and aristocratic people. Thus, this story reflects both the commercial culture as well as the material possessions that preoccupy the minds of the average person, which drove them to purchase the fruits until they were out of stock.

The narrative is based on fond memory of the director's grandmother, who used to eat her meals in reverse order in her nursing home. She began her meal with dessert and ended it with soup to emphasise the special and occasionally prepared dishes. She used to tell her grandson to eat the pudding first because she believed that life was uncertain. The food he chooses is inspired by memories from his past and conveys the message through their food culture that life is unpredictable and the soul's purpose is to eat.

The chef's experiment with stew at the gathering is described in the tale. The professor, Myles McCormick, and the fourteen participants discussed the day-to-day minutiae of living and dying without fresh food for more than fifteen months in seminars. Here, the choice of food is fresh food, which is essential for a healthy and long life. The chef tried an experiment with a stew that was prepared with a good pair of tanned shoes. He got the inspiration for this from Dell'Ova's diaries, where he described making an unusual stew of leather goods. The stew turns out well; in the kitchen, it was known as "shoe stew," and on the menu card, it is listed as "ragout dell'Ova." Everyone at the table enjoyed the stew, and it was the dish that was consumed the most; not even a single drop was wasted or left unfinished. Thus, they choose food based more on its taste than on its composition or ingredients. The Professor wrote in his report about Dell'Ova's conviction that if the circumstances are right, men and women can develop a taste for almost anything, which was more than proven on this occasion. They discussed eating fresh foods, but they enjoyed the stew without knowing its ingredients. They tasted the stew because they were blinded by the idea of wealth. It is believed that wealthy people used to eat richly and hygienically, which reveals the culture of the rich people in the group.

The plot revolves around the commercial culture of a shopping mall or supermarket. The computers in those locations keep track of each customer's previous purchases and use that information to offer them appealing discounts. It can even make food recommendations based on what they have previously bought or what they frequently buy. Consumers base their food selection on the advice and deals they receive from the supermarket. Additionally, it emphasises a shift in food culture, specifically the culture of frozen and packaged foods, which consumers prefer to buy and consume over fresh foods.

The story's central figure, an elderly man, has the best idea for gaining energy from food. He decides to consume foods like fruits that are nourished by the heat of the sun and meals that naturally cook themselves in the sunbeam. He simply followed the fundamental law of physics, which states that no energy is ever lost in his eating habits in order to gain energy. In this case, the choice of food is made based on the energy available, particularly from nature, the Sun.

A man who had no children and was divorced from his wife is the central character of the story. He lived like Thoreau in Walden, as mentioned in "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For" by Henry David Thoreau. He sleeps in the angling hut, washes in the river, and survives on what he grows. He used to give fruits and vegetables to the son of a neighbour who passed by. However, the rumours circulated throughout the village, causing the boy to throw those items into the garbage unnoticed. When the boy was left with no other option but to eat in front of that man, he ate the

freshly pulled baby carrot, which was more delicate and sweeter than the carrot purchased from a store. The boy was affected by both the man's life and the flavour of the fresh carrot, which inspired him to grow carrots and enjoy them on his own at a young age. In this case, the man's food selection is influenced by his lifestyle, specifically his desire to live in harmony with nature. The taste and freshness of organic food convinced the boy to change his food choice. In a time when everyone is rushing to get their hands on packaged food, the man's life exemplifies the harmony of life in organic food culture.

The story of a mother who struggles to feed her daughters who refuse to eat; she even tries to bribe them with their preferred foods, but they have no favourite foods. She even contacted a childcare magazine for advice. She tried everything she could, but it was all in vain. Finally, she became enraged and ended up drawing an angry face on the pizza, which her daughters had fun eating. Here is the change in food culture: children's food selections should be creative, entertaining, and enjoyable for them to eat, which will encourage them to have a proper intake of food.

The protagonist of the tale is a man who invites his friends and family over for a meal that must be lavish enough to satisfy them. The choice of food is made based on price rather than its health benefits because it deals with the rich culture that they must uphold in social settings in order to maintain their social status. His friend asked him for the expensive wine, and his cousin, who has a greater appetite, chose to eat richly flavoured food items and left other things behind for waste. Here, the choice of food is based on its richness, both in terms of money and in terms of flavour, smell, and taste. The man dislikes seeing well-produced food wasted. He wonders where the planet would be if lower-quality food was discarded. He knew that the world would starve, but he still forced himself to accept everything for his friends and family members because it was the custom that kept them together for many years. It clearly depicts the materialistic lives of the wealthy as well as the poor. The wealthy people give much importance to the price of food and also wasted it in the name of rich culture. It also brings the glance of the poor people around the world who are starving to death without food: "We are good friends with the proprietor and so you could be certain of a welcome and the grandest meal. Good wine as well. No table cats. Celice is the patron saint of cooks. She graces only the best of kitchens" (69).

The story is about the view of Alicja Lesniak. According to him, one must avoid champagne, wine, and wheat-based alcohol, malt beers, hard cheese, coffee, all forms of chocolate, strong pickles, cigarettes, rhubarb, spinach, tomatoes, cereals, cola, and meats, except white fish, prawns, and chicken breast, in order to be free from migraine. He also advised people to fast once a week, to drink regular water rather than sparkling water, to prefer fruits over sparkling water, to include



cooked onions or garlic with every dish, and, finally, to avoid sugar, salt, and spices in the kitchen for healthy living, particularly to avoid migraines. The selection of food is based on health. One must eat good food for perfect health. "Let thy food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food" are the words of Hippocrates in which he emphasises the importance of nutrition to prevent or cure disease. It shows the cultural changes in the food habits that one must avoid to lead a healthy life.

The story deals with the diet culture that a man followed till his death. The choice of foods like Brazil nuts, French pitted prunes, titbits, pumpkin seeds, bran, dried apricots, linseed, tomatoes, and green tea with honey are rich in fibre, vitamins, and proteins that are essential for a healthy diet. He followed his diet without a break until his death:

He placed his titbits on the plate, food to see off death. Pumpkin seeds to protect the prostate. Bran for bowels. Brazil nuts for their selenium. Dried apricots. French pitted prunes. Linseed. A tomato. There were no supplements or vitamins. He had no confidence in pills. Then he drank his green leaf tea with honey from the comb. He was a regimented man, well organized, reliable. He kept his diet up, without a break, until the day he died. (98)

Foods can be used by people to express their social status. Rare and expensive food is frequently used to represent wealth and high social economic status. The plot revolves around the hotel's chef, who is tasked with preparing the wedding dinner using only white ingredients. The chef had achieved the impossible by preparing the dinner, and it was served by the waiters in their white smocks. The choice of food is based on the colour of the dish. They preferred to cook everything in white for the wedding dinner in order to make it a memorable one because they considered food as a prestigious symbol rather than its need or benefits. It sheds light on changes in wedding culture; they made as many impossible dishes as possible to demonstrate their wealth and social status through this feast.

The story of a grandmother and her grandchildren whose choice of food is based on the availability of what they had. Grandma used to take the left-over chickens and pigs which the owner of the house kept for waste. She took such stuff and made dishes for her grandchildren and named them dramatically for their happiness. As they know the struggles of their grandmother, they simply eat their meals, which are the same for all the days, and hope for the undramatic food. Rich people's leftovers are roughly equal to the food of a poor family.

The story is about the fishermen, and the choice of food is based on its readiness. The fishermen would rather not eat fish. They felt that it brought bad luck. But they have no choice except to take it down for food. They have nothing to eat for survival, so they decide to eat the fish that they caught. Before cooking it, they soaked cod for a day or two in deep salt water to enlarge its size and

weight. They doubled its weight and had it as their two-week meal, which shows the poverty state of the fishermen and their choice to eat fish, which is in the possession of God for their survival.

The widow lady is the central character of the story who is in her grief. The choice of food is based on media culture. The lady overhears an actor on the radio talking about how he loved his cat and put the cat's ashes in all of his food after it died to have the feeling that the cat is still with him or within him. On hearing it, she tried the same with her husband's ashes and suffered from indigestion and other stomach problems. When she approached the doctor, he advised her to get out of his grief. He says, "You can't eat grief. It's far too strong and indigestible. You have to let the grief eat you. You have to let the sorrow swallow you" (163).

The novel ends up with "oh honey," as if the author finds the honey. There is a link between the last chapter and the title of the novel. The linkage shows that the author himself finds the honey in the larder of the devil. The starting quote of the novel talks about the bitter fruit in heaven and the honey in the devil's larder, which is drawn from the visitations of the 'lost' book of the Bible. The author begins and ends the novel with the reference to that quote, which raises questions about the presence of honey in the devil's larder, and it is answered in the end chapter of the novel, where the author gives the expression that he says the honey which brings out the ideology and religion that is the super structure of cultural materialism.

As food critic John Lanchester states, there is a difference between the role food played in one's identity in the past and now, for food culture has changed; "Once upon a time, food was about where you came from. Now, for many of us, it is about where we want to go---about who we want to be" (37). Social media as a tool for self-invention is unparalleled; with the construction of identity, it has been taken to all a new level as evidently everyone is an expert and has something to say. It seems people have gone from a society that eats to live to one that lives to eat.

Food can heal grievances, change one's minds, will, and sense of freedom. And especially after a satisfying meal, food has the transformative power to reach emotions making most problems less daunting, more solvable, and approachable. As a material object then, food is highly charged and yet at the same time, without it one will die: one's survival, if not physiological, then emotional, and possibly even psychological depends on it. Thus, food may be considered culture while it is being produced as well as when it is being prepared and even when it is being consumed. Curiosity, desire, appetite and taste, as cultural signifiers create distinctions, set up hierarchies, classifying one by what they consume. what they consume that largely define who they are, not only as individuals, but as culture and society.

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