

No slave owner is completely innocent. Although some are harsher than others and thus appear more villainized, even the nicer ones cannot escape the fact that they are participating in a dehumanizing system. In fact, anyone who has any relation to it at all is just as guilty as the cruelest slave owner. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Legree shows no mercy towards his slaves, thus earning himself plenty of harsh critique. On the other hand, Shelby and St. Clare might show some sort of compassion towards their property, but Stowe clearly does not idolise them either. Stowe uses Mr. Shelby and Augustine St. Clare to illustrate her argument that passivity is just as much a threat to the slave population as is immorality.

Although Shelby is portrayed as a characteristically “good” man, his actions and attitudes during the course of the novel reveal that he is, indeed, lacking in morals. In a time of financial crisis, he cares more about keeping his farm intact than in keeping families together. At first, it appears as if he is willing to make an effort to let Eliza keep her son, but he eventually gives in to Haley’s demands. What is interesting, however, is that Shelby hesitates to separate Eliza and Harry, but he is quick to sell off Tom, who is not only a husband and a father to his immediate family, but also acts as the moral glue holding the rest of the Shelby slaves together. Shelby’s decision to sell Tom and Harry--these two essential human beings--clearly brings him remorse, but he does not truly realize the consequences that will arise from it. In his eyes, he is doing what any other slave owner does on a daily basis: “I don’t know why I am to be rated, as if I were a monster, for doing what every one does every day” (82). Shelby believes he is simply doing business, for that is how everyone else appears to view slavery. The institution has become so normalized that he does not see how he alone is the “bad guy” in his wife’s eyes.

Unlike Shelby, Augustine St. Clare is keenly aware of slavery's evils. The issue is that he doesn't want to do anything about it. He makes it clear to his cousin Ophelia that despite her preconceived notions about Southern slave owners, he, for one, despises the slave institution: "Talk of the *abuses* of slavery! Humbug! The *thing itself* is the essence of all abuse!" (331-2). St. Clare recognizes that no individual should have so much power over another, but he believes that any system involving such power is only natural. After all, there have always been systems in place which require "lesser" people to serve those higher up on the social hierarchy. Despite the fact that St. Clare despises slavery so much, he doesn't want to be the one to take the first step in moving towards emancipation. He explains to Ophelia that he has "that kind of benevolence which consists in lying on a sofa, and cursing the church and clergy for not being martyrs and confessors. One can see, you know, very easily, how others ought to be martyrs" (451). While St. Clare certainly has the resources to make a serious impact, he hesitates to do so. As long as slavery continues to benefit him, he will have no desire to be the hero his daughter wants him to be. After all, there will surely be someone else who could light the torch of freedom.

Both Shelby and St. Clare might treat their slaves with kindness, but they face the institution of slavery with passivity. For them, slavery is a natural part of life and they are not ready to face the system's evils head-on. Although they might look tame in comparison to other slave owners such as Legree, their unwillingness to fight for their slaves' basic human rights means they are not as heroic as they should or could be.