Being ethical, in its simplest form, requires making the “right” choice that demonstrates responsibility and professionalism. The difficulty comes when no obvious or definite solution to the given situation exists. In the case of Nelle Harper Lee, uncertainty regarding her mental capacity has raised questions of whether or not her recently discovered book, *Go Set a Watchman*, should be published. As the CEO of HarperCollins, I must decide whether it is in our best interest to publish the book. Given these facts surrounding the case, along with the four steps of ethical decision making, as defined in Professor Joseph L. Badaracco’s *Defining Moments: A Framework for Moral Decisions*, I decided to dismiss the publication of “Go Set a Watchman” as proposed.

There is relatively strong evidence suggesting Ms. Lee’s attorney, Ms. Tonja Carter, manipulated her in order to have the book published for her personal gain. If true, the decision to publish would reflect negatively on HarperCollins, and could result in litigation and recalls. Ms. Lee is rumored to have been in a poor mental state due to her advanced age. At a younger age, however, Ms. Lee stated that she would not publish another book following her renowned *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Ms. Carter made all of the public statements on behalf of Ms. Lee following the announcement of the novel’s discovery, making it difficult to understand Ms. Lee’s true intentions. The book is a projected *New York Times* bestseller, which implies a large profit. As Ms. Carter is the legal guardian of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the public has speculated that she has manipulated Ms. Lee for her own financial gain.

The decision not to publish will result in the best overall net outcome. The net riskiness is lowest for the decision not to publish because there is almost no risk of any loss, whereas the
outcome of the decision to publish is uncertain. The first step in Badaracco’s four-step process is to determine which option will result in the maximum amount of good with the minimum amount of bad. In this context, the decision to publish the book would generate a lot of revenue, but may damage the image of the company. Furthermore, Ms. Lee’s legacy may also be damaged if the work isn’t satisfactory to the public. By withholding the release of the book, we are “playing it safe” by forfeiting a potential financial gain but do not expect to suffer any financial losses. I believe that the message of immorality we would be sending if we were to publish is more valuable to our company than the financial impact. The decision to not publish the book would best preserve the image of the Ms. Lee and HarperCollins, while mitigating other risks.

By not publishing the book, we don’t intrude on the rights of any persons or groups involved, which ensures that we do the least amount of harm. The decision must respect the rights of the author, shareholders, and stakeholders. The second step is to consider how the available options will affect the rights of all involved parties. Those whose rights are most important are the stakeholders: Ms. Lee herself, customers, employees, and creditors. Ms. Lee, for example, may have her reputation smeared if the book isn’t satisfactory, especially if she never gave her genuine consent to publish. It is, in fact, a violation of her rights if she was truly unable to give consent to publish. Other stakeholders may initially feel deprived of the opportunity to enjoy the highly-anticipated novel, but the decision to not publish is a conservative tactic to avoid future troubles that would affect the company negatively, such as lawsuits. I believe that this initial disappointment will be overshadowed by the subsequent increasing level of respect for the company. The other important group whose rights must be considered are the shareholders—those who have ownership in the company. Shareholders are often entitled to the company’s profits, and many believe that managers are obligated to
maximize profits. However, there is no right of the shareholders to a certain financial gain, just that they are entitled to whatever profits are generated. That said, the decision to publish would likely most benefit the shareholders in the company, in the short-term at least. Any negative repercussions from the public following the release of the book could, however, end up negatively affecting shareholders through decreasing profits. It is very likely that not publishing may prove to be financially sound in the long-run, as we will have established ourselves as a reputable company that will not infringe on the rights of our shareholders nor stakeholders. In a time where corporate social responsibility is on the rise, it is important not to forget that we serve more than to merely generate revenue. We are to act in a manner that has the best impact on society altogether, and will subsequently grow as a respected brand.

The decision to withhold the book from being released is the best decision for ensuring the preservation of the positive image of Ms. Lee and the company. Many people believe that publishing the book would be immoral, and the company separates itself from the uncertainty of the situation by choosing not to do so. The third step is to examine how the decisions align with a general definition of good character. A good test to use in this step is the Newspaper Rule, which refers to considering a decision being published on the front page of the newspaper and deciding which one sends the best message about integrity. In the choice to publish the book, the initial hype will immediately be followed by questions of wrongdoing. From the public’s perspective, it will appear that I succumbed to the pressure of capitalism. Given the Newspaper Rule, the decision not to publish would likely be well-received by the public, especially those opposing the release of the book. We would expect a divided set of responses from those who intended to purchase the book, with many respecting the decision and generating a neutral, or even positive, response. Despite any negative responses, I would be proud of my decision if it were published
on the front page of the newspaper. This decision would prevent any possible ensuing guilt or shame that would result if it were published. The Newspaper Rule is an extremely effective method in this case, as this decision will certainly appear on the front page of not only one, but hundreds of newspapers!

By not publishing, we are taking a conservative approach that would have the best real-world effect on all parties involved. The fourth and final test is to consider which option works best in the real world. In other words, some options may pass all of the tests, but are only truly reasonable in theory. In the case of Ms. Lee, the options are all practical and could be applied in the real world; both the decision to publish and the decision not to publish are plausible solutions in which the possible outcomes can be inferred using the facts. In publishing the book, it is known that the financial gain would be large, but the negative effects (potential damage to reputation, etc.) outweigh that aspect. In the decision not to publish the book, short-term finances likely would show no change, but the company reputation is almost certain to increase. In this particular situation, the decision will have the best long-term benefit to the company.

By applying Professor Badaracco’s Four Steps, I have concluded that withholding the release of *Go Set a Watchman* is the most ethical decision and the best of the available options. When considering the best net/net, personal rights, messages about character, and real world plausibility, the only option that passes each of the four tests is the one not to publish. As the old adage goes, some things are best left unsaid. In this case, the book is best left unpublished. While there is undoubtedly the short-term possibility of great financial gain, the long-term reputational risks associated with the decision to publish are too great. This decision demonstrates responsibility and professionalism while maintaining the respect and complying with the rights of all of parties involved.
Works Cited


