Emmet Gowin’s 1970 gelatin silver print *Edith and Grandmother, Christmas 1969* uses black and white photography and deliberate blurring to depict a young woman exposing her breasts as she stands behind her grandmother in what is likely a message about feminism and a defiance of feminine gender roles. The print is rectangular and rather small – the size of an average photograph – and is surrounded by a large white frame. Instead of distracting the viewer, the plainness of the frame succeeds in drawing the viewer’s attention more closely to the piece. While the photograph was taken almost fifty years ago, it still looks glossy and new, as if it could have been a photograph taken today. It appears to be a standalone piece – not a part of a series.

The photograph shows a young woman and her grandmother in a bedroom. Edith, as we know the young woman is called, is standing on the left side of the photo in front of the bed. She is staring at the camera, but she is not smiling. Instead, she faces it with a neutral or even defiant expression as she exposes her breasts. She shows absolutely no embarrassment at her actions. On the right side of the photo, the grandmother is sitting in a chair in the bottom corner. She is turned away from the camera and appears to be looking down slightly. Her features are very blurred, so the only detail that is easy to see is that of her age.

Because the piece is a photograph of real people, it is not stylized, idealized, or abstract. It is a natural depiction of two women. The way the figures are arranged first draws attention to Edith. Her standing position, the lighting, and her actions immediately capture the viewer’s attention. It is only afterwards that the viewer looks to the right and notices the grandmother sitting in the corner. The grandmother’s small, dark, and blurred form almost blends into the background, and she does not draw attention to herself the way her granddaughter does.
Both the light and the tonal values of this piece add to this effect. The print is in monochrome, which heightens the tension and drama of the photo. If the piece was not monochromatic, the different colors would be a distraction from the message and focus of the piece. Because Edith is the one viewers are meant to notice first, she is wearing dark tones which are a contrast to the lightness of her skin. This contrast is further highlighted by the light streaming in from the left side of the photograph. The light illuminates half of Edith’s face, leaving the other side in the shadows. Because her grandmother is facing away, the light shines on the back of her head, highlighting her white hair, instead of her face. Not only is her face blurred, but because of this it is also in the shadows. This is yet another way to show that Edith is the true focus of this piece.

Because this is a photograph rather than a painting, viewers already know that there is space because the piece features real people and objects. In the piece itself, however, the illusion of space is created by diminution and overlapping. The dresser, pictures, and doorway in the background are much smaller than they should be in comparison with the women. From this angle, Edith appears to be almost the same height as the doorway, and the picture frames that are visible on the dresser and on the walls look smaller than her head. This is because of diminution. Both women are also positioned in front of other objects. Edith is standing in front of the bed, and her grandmother is sitting in front of the dresser. They overlap these other things in the room, effectively creating space. There is also a hint of atmospheric perspective, as the objects toward the back of the room have much less detail than those toward the front.

The positioning of Edith and her grandmother forms a diagonal line from the upper left corner of the photo to the bottom right. Edith is standing to the left and her head is somewhat close to the upper left corner of the photo. Her grandmother, on the other hand, is very close to
the bottom right corner. The background is arranged in the opposite way. The tallest object, the
doorway, is in the upper right corner, and the bed, the shortest object, is in the bottom left corner.
If Edith were standing in front of the doorway instead of the bed, the photo would feel lopsided.
The way the objects are positioned helps create a sense of balance and symmetry in this piece.

This is an average-sized photograph, so it probably was not shown to the public on a
large scale, such as on a billboard or as a poster. The photo stands alone as a single piece, but it
could have been a part of a personal collection, a collection used to make a statement, or even
featured in a publication such as a magazine. Because of its subject matter, however, it is likely a
message about the feminist movement. If viewers have prior knowledge about the time period,
they know that the photograph was taken in the midst of an era of women’s rights activism. Even
if the viewer has no knowledge about the 1960s and 1970s, this idea is something that people are
still involved with today. Recently, there has been an upsurge in the feminist movement,
including the “Free the Nipple” campaign, in which the goal is to normalize the exposure of the
female body. Knowing this, it only makes sense to view Gowin’s artwork as a feminist message
about the societal norms that come with being a woman.

The overall mood of this piece is one of defiance, power, and change. As previously
mentioned, Edith is not embarrassed by her nudity. Not only is she staring at the camera
defiantly, but her stance suggests that she is strong and independent. Her legs are slightly parted
in a typically powerful position, showing that nothing about her is closed-off. In comparison, her
grandmother’s hunched over appearance makes her seem timid and distant. This, paired with the
grandmother’s blurred features and shadowy figure, suggests that Edith and her generation are
stepping away from previous norms.
The grandmother is a representation of these views in a number of ways. Like the grandmother, the older, traditional views of womanhood are being cast into the shadows. She appears to be wearing long sleeves and her hair might be pulled up. Her arms seem to be resting in her lap or at least close to her body. Unlike Edith, she seems very closed-off. In this way, the grandmother is like the traditional views of women because they were never meant to cause a scene. Women were supposed to clean, cook, and generally take care of the house while their husbands and fathers were the ones who worked and generally participated in the outside world. Women were, in a way, in their own little bubbles – the way the grandmother in the photograph appears to be.

Both Edith and her grandmother are representations of the challenge to these beliefs. The grandmother is blurred and in the shadows while Edith is standing proudly in the light. The blurring represents that these beliefs are beginning to fade away as women like Edith are beginning to take a stand. The light shines on Edith because more and more people are beginning to realize that women should be in charge of their own lives and their own bodies. The lack of color adds to the intensity of the photo and the movement itself. Some people have always believed that the feminist movement is not serious, and by stripping the image of color, it reflects how feminists took the movement seriously and honestly believed in it. It was not done to get a reaction out of people, and the setting of this print also represents this. Had it been taken in a public area, it would seem like Edith exposing her breasts would just have been to get a reaction out of the people around her. Because the photograph is only Edith and her grandmother in the privacy of a bedroom, however, it shows that these women truly believed in what they were standing up for. In conclusion, everything in Gowin’s piece from the subject matter and setting
to the blurring and lighting is an intentional way to bring the viewer’s attention to the changes of feminine norms due to the feminist movement.