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When I Am An Old Woman I Shall Wear Purple

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Embracing Rebellion and Aging Gracefully: The Meaning Behind "When I Am An Old Woman I Shall Wear Purple"

The phrase **"When I Am An Old Woman I Shall Wear Purple"** has become a cultural touchstone, evoking images of spirited, independent aging and a joyful defiance of societal expectations. Originating from the beloved poem *Warning* by Jenny Joseph, these words resonate with millions who see in them a promise to live life on their own terms—especially in their later years. This article explores the poem's history, its profound cultural impact, and how the sentiment of wearing purple has inspired a movement toward embracing individuality at every age. Whether you are encountering this phrase for the first time or are already a fan, understanding its depth can enrich your perspective on aging, rebellion, and the simple joy of wearing what makes you happy.

The Poem That Sparked a Movement: Jenny Joseph's "Warning"

Jenny Joseph wrote "Warning" in 1961 when she was just 30 years old. The poem begins with the unforgettable line: "When I am an old woman I shall wear purple / With a red hat which doesn't go, and doesn't suit me." These lines capture a spirit of liberation—a promise to abandon the need to please others and instead embrace eccentricity, color, and spontaneity. The poem goes on to describe a series of defiant acts: spending a pension on brandy and summer gloves, satin sandals, and running sticks along public railings. It is a humorous yet poignant celebration of growing old without losing one's zest for life.

Interestingly, Joseph never intended the poem to become an anthem. She later remarked that it was simply a lighthearted reflection on the contrast between responsible adulthood and the freedom of old age. Yet the poem struck a chord. It was voted the UK's favorite poem in a 1996 BBC poll and has been anthologized countless times. Its lasting popularity speaks to a universal longing: the desire to break free from the constraints of polite society and to fully express one's true self, **when I am an old woman I shall wear purple** becomes more than a line—it becomes a personal manifesto.

Weaving Purple into Everyday Life: The Symbolism of the Color

Purple has long been associated with royalty, spirituality, and creativity. In the context of Joseph's poem, wearing purple symbolizes a refusal to conform. It is a color that stands out, that does not "match" conventional expectations. The act of choosing purple—especially paired with a red hat—represents the audacity to be visually assertive, to say "I am here, and I am unapologetically myself." This symbolism has inspired a global community, particularly the Red Hat Society, founded in 1998, which adopted the poem's imagery for its mission of fun and friendship among women over 50. Members wear purple dresses and red hats as a badge of honor, celebrating the message that aging can be vibrant, playful, and full of color.

The phrase **when I am an old woman I shall wear purple** also encourages people to think about their future selves with joy rather than fear. Instead of dreading wrinkles or slowing down, the poem invites us to anticipate a time when we can cast off the expectations of others and embrace our quirks. It is a call to start living authentically right now, not only when we are old. Many readers find themselves adopting purple accessories early, as a daily reminder to prioritize happiness over propriety.

Beyond the Poem: Aging with Attitude and Purpose

Redefining Later Life Through Literature

Literature has long been a mirror for society's views on aging. From Shakespeare's "sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything" to contemporary narratives of decline, old age is often portrayed as a period of loss. Jenny Joseph's poem offers a refreshing counter-narrative. **When I am an old woman I shall wear purple** challenges the stereotype of the meek, invisible senior. Instead, it paints a picture of a rebellious, joyful elder who runs down the street in slippers and picks flowers from other people's gardens. This image has empowered generations to see aging not as a curse but as a final chance to be unapologetically oneself.

In fact, the poem has been cited in gerontology studies, self-help books, and even retirement community marketing materials as a way to shift perceptions. It encourages older adults to engage in "unbecoming" behaviors—unlearning the polite restraints of a lifetime. The poem's popularity suggests that many people, regardless of age, yearn for permission to break rules that no longer serve them. The phrase **when I am an old woman I shall wear purple** gives that permission, and it is often shared among friends as a vow to support each other in living fully.

Practical Steps: How to Channel Your Inner Purple Spirit

You don't have to wait until you are old to adopt the **when I am an old woman I shall wear purple** philosophy. Here are a few ways to incorporate its spirit into your daily life, regardless of your age:

- Wear something that makes you feel bold. It doesn't have to be purple—find your own signature color or accessory that represents your personality. The key is to wear it with pride, even if it "doesn't go."
- Practice small acts of rebellion. Skip the formalities occasionally. Eat dessert first, laugh loudly, or take a different route home. These small choices strengthen your ability to live authentically.
- Cultivate a circle of friends who celebrate eccentricity. Just as the Red Hat Society grew from a single poem, you can form your own "purple tribe" where uniqueness is valued.
- Write your own "warning" list. Jot down things you want to do when you have fewer responsibilities—or start doing some of them now. The poem reminds us that the future is uncertain, so why wait?

The Cultural Impact: From Poetry to a Global Sisterhood

The Red Hat Society is perhaps the most visible manifestation of the poem's influence. Founded by Sue Ellen Cooper in 1998, the society began when she gave a friend a red hat and a copy of the poem as a birthday gift. The idea blossomed into a worldwide organization with chapters across the United States, Canada, and beyond. Members, known as "Red Hatters," gather for tea parties, parades, and volunteer activities, wearing purple attire and red hats as a uniform of joy. The society's motto, "We may be old, but we are not dead—and we certainly are not boring!" echoes the poem's sentiment.

Beyond the society, the phrase **when I am an old woman I shall wear purple** appears on greeting cards, T-shirts, mugs, and inspirational posters. It has become shorthand for a certain kind of rebellious aging. The poem itself is frequently read at retirement parties, women's retreats, and even funerals as a celebration of a life well-lived. It transcends literary analysis to become a practical guide for growing old with grace and grit. Moreover, the poem has inspired countless other works of art, music, and theater, cementing its place in popular culture.

Why the Message Endures Across Generations

The enduring appeal of **when I am an old woman I shall wear purple**lies in its universality. Although the poem speaks specifically from the perspective of a woman, its themes of defiance, joy, and self-acceptance resonate with people of all genders and ages. In a world that often values youth and conformity, the poem offers an alternative vision: one where getting older means gaining the freedom to be your true self. It encourages readers to reimagine the narrative of their own lives, to swap the script of decline for one of adventure.

Furthermore, the poem's humor makes its message palatable. It invites us to laugh at ourselves and at the absurdity of social rules. When Joseph writes, "I shall sit down on the pavement when I'm tired," she reminds us that even the act of resting can be a statement when done with intention. The poem gives us permission to be a little silly, a little messy, and a lot more human. That is why, decades after its composition, the simple image of an old woman in purple and a red hat remains a powerful emblem of living authentically.

Conclusion: Wear Purple Now, and Wear It Proudly

Jenny Joseph's "Warning" is much more than a poem—it is a call to action. The line **when I am an old woman I shall wear purple**has inspired millions to reclaim aging as a time of liberation rather than limitation. Whether you join a Red Hat Society chapter, buy a purple scarf, or simply remind yourself to speak your mind, the message is clear: don't wait until you are old to live boldly. Start today. Wear purple—or any color that lights you up—and let your spirit shine. After all, the best time to embrace your authentic self is right now. And as the poem reminds us, we may need to practice a little so that when the time comes, we are ready to be gloriously, unapologetically ourselves.

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DIGITAL EDITION

when-i-am-an-old-woman-i-shall-wear-purple

DIGITAL EDITION

when-i-am-an-old-woman-i-shall-wear-purple

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