What is a Sonnet?

For a full answer, the Wikipedia entry is probably as good a place as any to start.

But you may like to have the answer in, well, sonnet form. (See box on the right).

What's a Sonnet, Miss?

My teacher says a sonnet is a poem
Of fourteen lines. You have to make it rhyme
In certain ways, she said. Most of the time
It goes A B B A and when you come
To the next 4 lines it's C D D C.
That makes up eight: they call it an octet.
Do four more and end with a nice couplet
(That's two that rhyme together.) It's easy!
Shakespeare wrote a lot of them. He was good
At it, must've had the rhythm in his head
I reckon. 'Lines have ten beats,' Miss said,
'But nine or eleven varies it. Should
You want to have a go, I recommend
A pencil or computer, not a pen!'

The Sonnet is only a form, after all, a structure. The fact that something is a sonnet says very little about the content of the poem. Sonnets have been used for both serious and light-hearted themes. Because they are relatively short, they aren't used to tell stories. There is really only space to make a single point and give some examples. If you try writing a sonnet, you'll see what I mean.

Many sonnets present a main point or theme in the first eight lines and then clarify it or even contradict it in the final six lines. It's as if there is an "Ah, but..." at the beginning of the ninth line. This is something to look out for rather than a rule. This is often called the 'turn', or if you want to be really posh, the 'volta'. (The Volta is also a river in West Africa and the name of an Italian scientist who, among other things invented the electric battery and from whom we get the term 'volt'. If you research the River Volta you will see the connection between the river and the 'turn' in a sonnet.)

In terms of form, the sonnet written in English is (with a few notable exceptions - e.g. Hopkins) 14 lines long. It is most commonly written in iambic pentameter* and has a clear rhyme scheme.

The rhyme scheme can vary from the very rigid to the somewhat relaxed! Most pre-20th century sonnets are fairly rigid in their schemes. Given the pressure this puts on certain line endings, it's amazing that so many fine sonnets were written with such seeming ease and grace.

Keats, Wordsworth and many others used the pattern ABBAABBA CDCDCD - just four rhymes for the whole poem - and managed to achieve that without the rhymes seeming strained.

Wordsworth's **'On Westminster Bridge'** is a good example of a sonnet with the demanding ABBAABBA CDCDCD rhyme pattern:

Earth has not anything to show more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty:
This City now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
Never did sun more beautifully steep
In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;
Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will:
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still!

* for more on 'iambic' and 'pentameter' see Techniques.

For something completely different but still about sonnets, see – 'Shall I compare thee to a fairground ride?'

As is Keats' **'On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer'**

Much have I travelled in the realms of gold
   And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;
   Round many western islands have I been
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.
Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
   That deep-browed Homer ruled as his demesne;
   Yet never did I breathe its pure serene
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:
Then I felt like some watcher of the skies
   When a new planet swims into his ken;
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
   He stared at the Pacific—and all his men
Looked at each other with a wild surmise—
   Silent, upon a peak in Darien.