Background Information:  
The Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth, and Coleridge

Political Context

The 1790's was a time of astonishing political turmoil in Britain and in Europe: the French Revolution wound its way from heady optimism to increasingly bloodthirsty attacks on the old order, England's government grew increasingly conservative and authoritarian in the face of the French threat, Napoleon rose to power, and Irish dissatisfaction with the English culminated in a major rebellion in 1798, followed by the unpopular Union of 1800.

The timeline shows us the steadily increasing crackdowns on radical speech and action through the decade. In the early 1790's, the French Revolution had loud supporters and opponents debating the cause in a relatively free English environment; as the French situation grew more volatile and threatening, however, free speech evaporated, with the Gagging Acts of 1795 solidifying the government's broad power to execute those who opposed it.

Wordsworth and Coleridge both began the decade in deep sympathy with the French cause and with radical politics in general. Coleridge, along with fellow poet Robert Southey (who was actually much better-known that Coleridge at the time), planned a "pantisocracy" in western Pennsylvania, where all property would be held in common. Wordsworth also supported the French and spent a good deal of time across the channel; his poetry of the early 90's emphasized the failure of the English government to alleviate poverty in England, especially for veterans of the many wars of the previous decades.

At the end of the decade, however, both were becoming more conservative, as were a great many supporters of the early French Revolution. The excesses of the Revolution, which for most observers made it distastefully similar to the "tyranny" it had opposed, made both poets draw back from radicalism in different ways. Twenty years later, Byron would skewer the turn from radicalism of the "Lake Poets," as they came to be called, opening the Dedication to *Don Juan* thus:

Bob Southey! You're a poet--poet Laureate,  
And representative of all the race;  
Although 'tis true you turn'd out a Tory at  
Last,--yours has lately been a common case . . .

The rest of Byron's dedication skewers all three "Lakers" for the turn to Toryism (the side that opposed the French most vehemently), a turn that had become very clear by 1818. Critics still debate, however, how much of that turn is evident in the *Lyrical Ballads*, which present a radical case for the "language of men" but also emphasize--in some ways, at least--the control of a polished poet over that language.
Literary Context

Its audience in 1798 would have recognized immediately that the title of *Lyrical Ballads* was a contradiction in poetic terms: ballads, as you have seen, tell a story in a repetitive, highly musical form, generally in ballad meter. Lyrics, however, generally take the listener or reader through the thoughts of a more pensive speaker, and they emphasize a more "polished" tightness of language over the intense rhythmic feel of the ballad. More connotatively, ballads tended to be a "folk" medium emphasizing simple speech, while lyrics—or famous lyrics, at least—tended to be more "literary" and to be built more heavily on allusions to the canonical tradition of classical lyric poetry. ("Lyric" is an Aristotelian category, while "ballad" is not.)

The "ballad revival" of the late eighteenth century had been underway for decades by 1798; the craze for ancient, "simple" poetry gained steam in the 1760's with James Macpherson's fraudulent "translations" of the poetry of Ossian, an ancient Celtic bard, and Bishop Percy's *Reliques of Ancient Poetry*, which contained "Sir Patrick Spens," among other things.

The 1798 First Edition and Its Reception

The 1798 *Lyrical Ballads* appeared in one anonymous volume; the title page reads, "LYRICAL BALLADS, with A FEW OTHER POEMS," and then gives the printers and date. The volume opened with "The Rime of the Ancyent Maryner" and closed with "Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey," and it had no Preface, only a short Advertisement that emphasized the experimental nature of the poems and reminded readers that "The Thorn" was not in the voice of the author.

Although Wordsworth portrayed the reviews as overwhelmingly negative, and perhaps sincerely believed them to be so, they were quite mixed and never entirely negative. (We all understand the tendency to remember negative comments on our writing most vividly, I'm sure.) When the reviews were negative, they concentrated on the difficulty of the language of the "Rime" and—in spite of the Advertisement's defenses—the inappropriately "low" narrators in poems such as "The Thorn."

Revising: The 1800 and 1802 Editions

The 1800 edition had a number of changes and additions, some more obvious than others. First, it had a second volume of Wordsworth's poems, and the anonymity of 1798 was replaced by sole authorship credit going to Wordsworth (though he did acknowledge in the Preface that "a friend" had written some of the poems). The newly-added Preface defended the poems against the critics' charges and offered an extended commentary on the nature of poetry and poetic composition, developing theories that became enormously famous and influential in the following two centuries.
A number of more subtle changes also--arguably, at least--produced significant effects on the overall meaning of the volume. The "Rime"--the most suspiciously supernatural poem of the previous edition--became "The Ancient Mariner: A Poet's Reverie" (note the changes in spelling as well as wording), explanatory notes were added in the left margin, and "Expostulation and Reply" replaced it as the opening poem of the volume. The order of many of the other poems was also rearranged, and the second volume stayed much closer to the realistic tone of Wordsworth's lyrics than the supernatural balladry of Coleridge's "Rime."