The period from Queen Victoria's ascension to the Great War lasted for three quarters of a century. At the beginning of this relatively short time span, Britain and the British were very different from what they became by the end. Perhaps no other period in British history has been subjected to such widely different readings, both from contemporaries and from the historians who studied it later. These interpretations range from claims that this was Britain’s Golden Age—when the country lead the world in politics, technology, industry, trade, culture and, of course, in empire-building—to declarations that it was the time of the greatest inequality between rich and poor, as noted Victorian statesman and author Benjamin Disraeli put it, the time of the “Two Nations.” In other words, many observers identify this period as a time of sharp hypocrisy between grand rhetoric and ignoble deeds. Paradoxically, all of these perspectives and opinions are justified and can be supported through a comprehensive scholarly study of the social, cultural, and political developments from this period. One particularly fruitful method for approaching this task is to conduct a social and cultural-linguistic analysis of various primary texts, which are emblematic of this particular historical period.

So far, I have referred to the Victorian and Edwardian periods together as a unit of British cultural history. However, there are many reasons to treat them as two distinctive periods. In spite of their many common features in the social, political and cultural spheres of life, Edwardian Britain was very different from Victorian Britain. In the most general terms, this opposition can be understood as the contrast between a traditional, even conservative way of life, with correspondingly moderate moral, social, and aesthetic values and the emergence of British modernism, and a period of rapid and dramatic change in virtually every sphere of life. Of course, one could argue that the basis for these later changes had been laid down in the preceding
decades of the late Victorian era, and that they in turn became most evident in the following
decade, after the Great War. Yet the fact that the Edwardian period occupies the central position
in this overall sociocultural transformation testifies to its crucial role in ushering in these
changes. Let us take a quick glance at each of the two periods.

The early nineteenth century was a difficult period for Britain. The country narrowly
escaped French invasion during the Napoleonic Wars. Irish independence and the issue of
Catholic emancipation were burning questions, which proved very difficult to resolve. The
institution of the monarchy was caught in a deep and protracted decline: the Kings (George IV
and William IV) were unpopular, and the idea of royal power was violently attacked by
republicans and radicals influenced by the French Revolution. Morale among the upper classes
and of the nation as a whole was very low.

This situation started to change with the ascent of a new monarch, the eighteen-year-old
Victoria, to the British throne. At first, it seemed that very little had been altered. But gradually
key changes became apparent. Despite the fact that royal power had been greatly restricted by
law and custom, the Queen, her husband, and their family life exerted a major improving
influence on the standards of public and family life in Britain and on national ethics in general.

Moreover, under Victoria the country developed rapidly in industry, and the Great
Exhibition of 1851 confirmed Britain’s reputation as the “workshop of the world.” For the
working classes, however, this was achieved at a very high price—their working and living
conditions were appalling, especially those of coal-miners and factory workers. But the situation
started to change when leading authors, including Charles Dickens and Benjamin Disraeli, drew
the public’s attention to the problems of poverty. In response, a number of governmental
commissions began to study the conditions endured by the working class and published detailed
reports on them. The legislation that followed gradually improved the circumstances of female
and child laborers and restricted their working hours. In this way, the living standards of the
lower classes were vastly improved by the end of the Victorian era. These social welfare
improvements were accompanied by reforms in the electoral system, beginning with the Reform Bill of 1831. Nevertheless, it would still take nearly a century for all men and women to be granted the right to vote. There were also great reforms in the areas of education and health care. By today’s standards, of course, life for the vast majority of British people in the early twentieth century was still hard and bleak, but compared to 1837, the improvements are nonetheless striking. In sum, during the Victorian era, the government began attending to the needs of the poor and taking care of their living and working conditions, their physical and moral health and their education. It was a long time, however, before these measures were fully implemented.

In terms of culture, the Victorian period was remarkable. Many critics argue that this was the Golden Age of British culture, rivalled only by the Elizabethan Age in the country's long history. This was especially true of literature. There are too many illustrious authors from this period to name here, but one must mention William Thackeray and Charles Dickens, two fathers of the realist novel, the Bronte sisters, Lewis Carroll, Wilkie Collins, Lord Tennyson and Robert Browning, Dante Gabriel and Christina Rossetti, Thomas Hardy, Anthony Trollope, Oscar Wilde, Robert Lewis Stevenson and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. All these authors developed their own unique styles, and many of them started new genres and movements, which were elaborated upon in the subsequent century. Also, all these writers depicted the realia, characteristic features, and chief problems of the Victorian age. A close reading of their works, therefore, can help us recreate a vivid picture of the period, to feel its atmosphere, and to gain insights into its intricate textures and complexities.

Compared to Victorian era, the Edwardian age was much shorter, lasting only nine years, from 1901 to 1910, when Victoria's eldest son and heir, Edward VII, ruled. In terms of social and cultural development, however, it makes sense to also include the first years of George V's reign – in other words, the years leading up to and during the First World War – into the Edwardian period. The Great War marked the boundary between the preceding decades and the subsequent, modern period of British history more definitely than did the turn of the century or the death of a
monarch. Thus, in cultural terms, we can periodize Edwardian Britain to mean the years 1901 to 1918.

The Edwardian period is both similar to and different from the one that preceded it. The social and political reforms of the middle and late Victorian period continued and were expanded in the Edwardian era. Living and working conditions for the working class were improved, and the education and health care systems became more comprehensive and accessible. Pensions were introduced for the poor. In other words, during this period the foundations of the welfare state were laid. In contrast to the previous age, often these social benefits were not benevolently granted by the government, but rather were pushed through by trade unions and by the newly formed Labour Party, both of which were emerging as formidable political forces.

The general atmosphere of this period was also very different. The Victorians had striven to revive and preserve the traditions and customs of the past, precipitating a widespread interest in history and hence the historical novel, Romantic poetry, the Pre-Raphaelites gained new popularity. By contrast, in the Edwardian period, popular interests shifted from the past to the future. This was prompted by rapid developments in science and technology, including the mass production of cars, motorcycles, gramophones, and other consumer machinery. The tempo of life accelerated greatly. These changes were duly reflected in literature—such as in the popular science fiction of H.G. Wells, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle—music and dance (including jazz, tango, foxtrot), and in the new field of cinematography.

Not all Edwardian writers welcomed these changes. In some of his works, H.G. Wells expressed rather a pessimistic view of these all-too-swift technological developments, G.K. Chesterton openly favoured the conservative, "truly English" Victorian tradition over the hectic and dehumanising life of his day, and John Galsworthy bitterly criticised the new passion for materialism, arguing that property distorted the soul and created the new "hollow men"—a term originally coined by T.S. Eliot. In short, the literature of this relatively short period was very
rich, displaying a great variety of genres, forms and innovations, which directly reflected the complexities and contradictions of the new century.