Eliot’s poetry has a timeless appeal which endorses an audience’s values and expectations. Evaluate this statement using Preludes and at least one other poem.

Through poetry, Eliot provides an accurate depiction of modernist concerns which have a timeless appeal to readers. The representation of the modern man within T.S. Eliot’s poetry portrays the lack of identity and the cyclical nature of life which are issues present throughout time and thus appeals to all audiences. The pursuit for identity and purpose within a society controlled by machinery is a continuous strife for individuals throughout time, where destruction and urban decay are prevalent. Modernism encompasses the backlash against the representation of reality by Realists, to what was more felt to be a more accurate illustration of the individual and the broader world in the early 20th century. More specifically, modernism within poetry encompasses the questioning of representation and stylistic fragmentations through a highly ambivalent persona and their relation to society. Ideas within modernism include the lack of connection between the individual and society, defamiliarisation, isolation and the fragmented individual. Eliot’s oeuvre, particularly ‘Preludes’ (1911), ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ (1915), ‘Rhapsody On a Windy Night’ (1920) and ‘Hollow Men’ (1925) encapsulate issues of the Modernist period that appeal across time.

Through Eliot’s use of form and language techniques, Eliot is able to appeal to an audience’s values and expectations regardless of their context.

The portrayal of the modern man as an existential flaneur, a man who is an observer of modern life, by Eliot reflects the social milieu of the modern world and is particularly relevant to contemporary readers, where loss of identity and monotony are prevalent. Eliot employs an extended metaphor that appears zoomorphic “The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes” within ‘Prufrock’ to allow readers to fully comprehend Prufrock’s flaneur like qualities through a mysterious tone. This image of pollution and smoke infiltrating and engulfing the city characterises moods and feelings of entrapment and a sense of paralysis. Michael North suggests that this “metaphor has in a sense been hollowed out to be replaced by a series of metonyms” of Prufrock’s inability to face society “and thus stands as a rhetorical introduction to what follows.” Therefore, the metonym allows contemporary readers to comprehend Prufrock and the modern man as one entrapped within his own mind and paralysed by his own spiritual timidity and cowardice and his morbid self-consciousness, afraid of society, unable to live fully. This is further reinforced in the use of synecdoche as a trope of fragmentation in “And I have known the eyes already, known them all-”.

Eliot’s use of fragmentation reveals Prufrock’s disjointed and alienated psyche as he views people as disembodied parts, rather than whole. Thus, accentuating his alienation within a society which he believes to be staring at him and which views his as an object. For modern readers, the lack of connection between society and the individual resonate due to vast technological changes, similar to Prufrock’s world where a sense of community is lacking. Furthermore, ‘Preludes’ explores the pursuit of individuality within the modern world where false pretence and “other masquerades” prevail. The symbolism of “masquerades” represent the loss and hidden identity of the modern man through illusion and façade. This reinforces the necessity for hiding one’s identity through the need to present a false self. Individuals within the modernist period were bounded by the need to assimilate in society and expected to present a false self. This need is similar for contemporary readers who are expected to present a false sense of self through technology and the media.

Additionally, the anaphora of “We are the hollow men/We are the stuffed men” in ‘Hollow Men’ draws attention to the paradox of how the modern man is full of emptiness and deep passivity. The depiction of hopeless and empty lives with no meaning or sense of purpose is comparable for the
entirety of humanity through Eliot’s use of inclusive language. We are part of the accusation as the audience, made out of “straw” and that our voices are “dried” and merely a “whisper” establishes the ghostly and desolate tone. Eliot is suggesting that the issue of the modern man leading a meaningless life is comparable to us as contemporary readers. Furthermore, the allusion and synecdoche in “Eyes I dare not meet in dreams” references Dante who cannot meet the eyes of his lover as he feels shame and has an impure, tainted soul. He is unable to commit and has a lack of sight, which links to ‘Rhapsody On a Windy Night’, which explores concerns of a lack of human connection and a struggle to face society. The ironic panic is evident within the fearful tone and trying to escape the gaze of the eyes. This lack of connection and fear of being watched within the modernist world comparatively to contemporary contexts is similar through the constant surveillance throughout society and technology as the primary medium of communication which has separated and isolated individuals. Therefore, a lack of identity within the modernist period, where sameness is prevalent and a lack of connection is a timeless concern for individuals.

Hope within a fallen world and industrialised society is difficult, especially when humanity appears as contorted and driven by machinery. Eliot depicts through his poetry, the oppression of humanity within the modern world due to mass production and reliance of technology to function. The metaphor “his soul stretched tight across the skies” in ‘Preludes’, emphasises humanity as destroyed and contorted. The use of 3rd person masculine “He”, can be interpreted as a biblical allusion to God, representing Jesus on the crucifix using imagery of his body stretched tight across the cross. Eliot employs this biblical allusion to parallel the persona, who feels that he has sacrificed his own soul and life to the mundane city, to Jesus who died to forgive the sins of Christians. Therefore, explaining the living death of a spiritually empty, monotonous and routinized existence within the modernist world as painful as the death of Jesus. Whether the interpretation of the masculine pronoun refers to God, or another entity is contended by contemporary critic Pamela Cohen who perceives it as “not a man per se but an expression of an idea, from the perspective of Eliot himself”. Similarly, within ‘Rhapsody’, the lack of communication and connection within society explains the destruction of humanity within the modernist period. Typically, children are portrayed in fiction with bright, eager eyes as they are naive and open to all, but the persona remembers that they “could see nothing behind that child’s eye”. This is perhaps Eliot’s greatest indictment of society, to suggest that even the children can no longer communicate. Axel Kruse interprets this “bizarre dreamlike imagery” as “programmatic development of distinctive kind of imagery … that creates complex and ambiguous meaning about modern identity”. Thus, suggesting that Eliot’s use of imagery is open to interpretation for contemporary readers. “So the hand of a child, automatic” further reinforces the idea of children as soulless and of mechanical movement without thought, which emphasises the industrialised, mechanized nature aspect of the modern world. Eliot portrays this image of electronic and mechanical behaviour to reveal that as individuals, we accept and interpret our memories by instinct, layered with the sequence of behaviour long ingrained into our psyches. As modern readers, the issue presented by Eliot are still relevant as we are also trapped within the world of routine and the cyclical nature of life through our day to day scheduled monotonous lives. Moreover, Hollow Men encapsulates the moral weakness, timidity and pathetic cowardice of humanity. Eliot uses onomatopoeia within “This is the way the world ends/Not with a bang but a whimper” to create a juxtaposition of the expected sound of the world ending, to one barely audible to emphasise the inadequacy and fear of modern man. Eliot is implying that the stones we have constructed will endure, but the world ends when we have lost faith. In doing so, Eliot speaks to or articulates man’s need for a transcendent faith in a world which seems to make such faith almost impossible to reach or experience. Pamela Cohen suggests that “we should take heed of the warning of the poem”, for us to “contribute rather than expect for entitlement only
comes with contribution to the greater good of humanity”. Therefore, the lack of hope and industrialised aspect of society causes the destruction of humanity throughout time.

Eliot explores and epitomises the struggles of the individual in the modern industrialised world through his timeless appeal. ‘Preludes’, ‘Prufrock’, ‘Hollow Men’ and ‘Rhapsody On a Windy Night’ emphasise the concerns of Modernists of a lack of identity and hope within an industrialised society are expressed through Eliot’s effective use of language and form that appeals to audiences across varying contexts.