THE TITLE
A period of darkness is a period of despair, a period when things are not going right. In
the title, the poet is addressing his country, Guyana and saying that the country is going
through a period of despair. The fact that the poet refers to his country as “my love”
shows that he is patriotic. A patriot is a person who loves his country and is prepared to
defend it. In this poem, however there is a sense of hopelessness as the enemy of the
country, the invading forces, are stronger and better equipped than the Guyanese people.

BACKGROUND
British forces invaded the poet’s homeland British Guyana in 1953. The mission stated
was to “maintain order” after a period of internal political and racial strife in the country.
The PPP led by Cheddi Jagan had won the elections, but the British fearing that Jagan
would turn the country into a communist state, suspended the constitution and removed
Jagan from office, thus frustrating the will of the people to be governed as they saw fit.

CONTENT
The speaker repeats the words of the title in the first line to reiterate how unhappy he is
with the events that are taking place. Indeed the word “dark” is used four times in the
poem to show how unhappy the speaker is with the events that are unfolding. In the
second line there is a metaphorical reference to brown beetles crawling about. The poet
defines the soldiers as “brown beetles” because their uniforms are brown and also to
show that he dislikes the soldiers and resents their invasion. Beatles are generally seen as
a nuisance and generally people dislike things that crawl, so this is an effective
metaphor.
“The shining sun is hidden in the sky” is another interesting metaphor in the first stanza.
It is repeating precisely what was said in the title and in the first line. If you cannot see
the sun, there is darkness. The poet is emphasizing the idea that his country is going
through a dismal, shameful period.
The first stanza ends with the line “Red flowers bend their heads in awful sorrow.” It is
highly unlikely that the poet is saying that the flowers of Guyana are sorrowing or that
they are bending their heads. The fact is that red is a symbol for courage. It is also the
colour used to represent communism. This line is an effective metaphor because the poet
is showing two things: (i) that the Guyanese people have lost their courage and (ii) that
there is no hope of communism taking root while the British troops are in the country.

In the second stanza, “the season of oppression” implies that the Guyanese people are
being treated cruelly and that their rights and freedoms are being denied during the time
(season) of the British occupation. “Dark metal” is a direct reference to the guns of the
soldiers and of course “tears” shows that the people are unhappy with what is happening.
“It is the festival of guns, the carnival of misery.” A festive occasion is a joyous
occasion, an occasion for celebration. A carnival is also a joyous occasion. The speaker
uses oxymoron, in this line to show that while the people of Guyana are made miserable
by the terror of the guns of the invaders, by contrast the British seem to enjoy inflicting
misery on the people. “Everywhere the faces of men are strained and anxious” further
expresses the enormous pressure under which the people are living.
The third and final stanza starts with two rhetorical questions. The poet invites the reader to listen and to experience the fear and apprehensions of the people as the “strange invader”, the British soldiers assume control of their country. The image reflected in the second rhetorical question “Whose boot of steel tramps down the slender grass?” is also very powerful. “Slender grass” does not merely show that British soldiers are walking on Guyanese soil. The poet wants us to see that “boots of steel” and “tramps” represents the power, force and brutality of the soldiers and to contrast this with the helplessness of the people who are represented by “slender grass”. This shows that the people are not able to defend themselves because the British are just too strong for them. It emphasizes the oppression and unfairness.

The poet describes the invaders and the British government that they represent as “the man of death”. In doing so he is not only referring to the fact that these soldiers have the ability to kill people. He shows them as “aiming at your dreams”. These presumably are the dreams and aspirations of the Guyanese people of governing themselves in a way that they see fit, not to be directed by any foreign force. It is also important to note that Martin Carter sees the Guyanese people as being asleep. He seems to be suggesting that had they been more watchful or vigilant, the invaders would not have an excuse for taking control of their country.

This is a poem of deep shame, hurt, bitterness despair and helplessness. The speaker is critical of the attitude of the foreigner who uses the might of guns to subjugate (bend to its will) a smaller, weaker nation. However he also implies that the Guyanese people are not entirely blameless since they allowed themselves metaphorically to be overcome by “sleep”.

**DEVICES**

The speaker uses several devices to get his message across. These occur in the forms of metaphors, oxymoron, rhetorical question and repetition. Find these where they occur in the poem and consider what makes them effective.