Quantifying Fear in Stephen King's Fiction

Novels: Pet Sematary & The Shining

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Story Context — The Two Novels

Pet Sematary (1983)
A family moves to a quiet town in Maine and discovers a burial ground with the power to bring the dead back to life. As grief and denial take control, the story explores how far a person will go to reverse loss — and the horrifying cost of doing so.

The Shining (1977)
A father takes a winter caretaker job at an isolated hotel, where supernatural forces amplify his inner instability. The novel follows the slow descent into madness, blending isolation, psychological breakdown, and haunting influences.

Why These Two Books?
Both novels explore fear, but through different lenses:

Pet Sematary: fear of death, grief, and inevitability

The Shining: fear of madness, isolation, and loss of control

Can Fear Be Measured?

- King turns ordinary words into psychological triggers
- Fear emerges through sensory detail + psychological tension
- Our analysis will show us if there are patterns behind this fear language used

Research Question

How does Stephen King linguistically construct fear in Pet Sematary versus The Shining?
Sub Questions:
Which fear-related words dominate each novel?
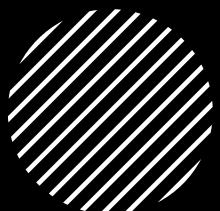
How is fear distributed across narrative time?

How does sensory language differ between the two novels?

Do semantic structures of fear, captured via word embeddings, differ across the novels?

Data & Methods (Overview)

Data & Methods (overview)

Tokenized full novels

Custom fear lexicon
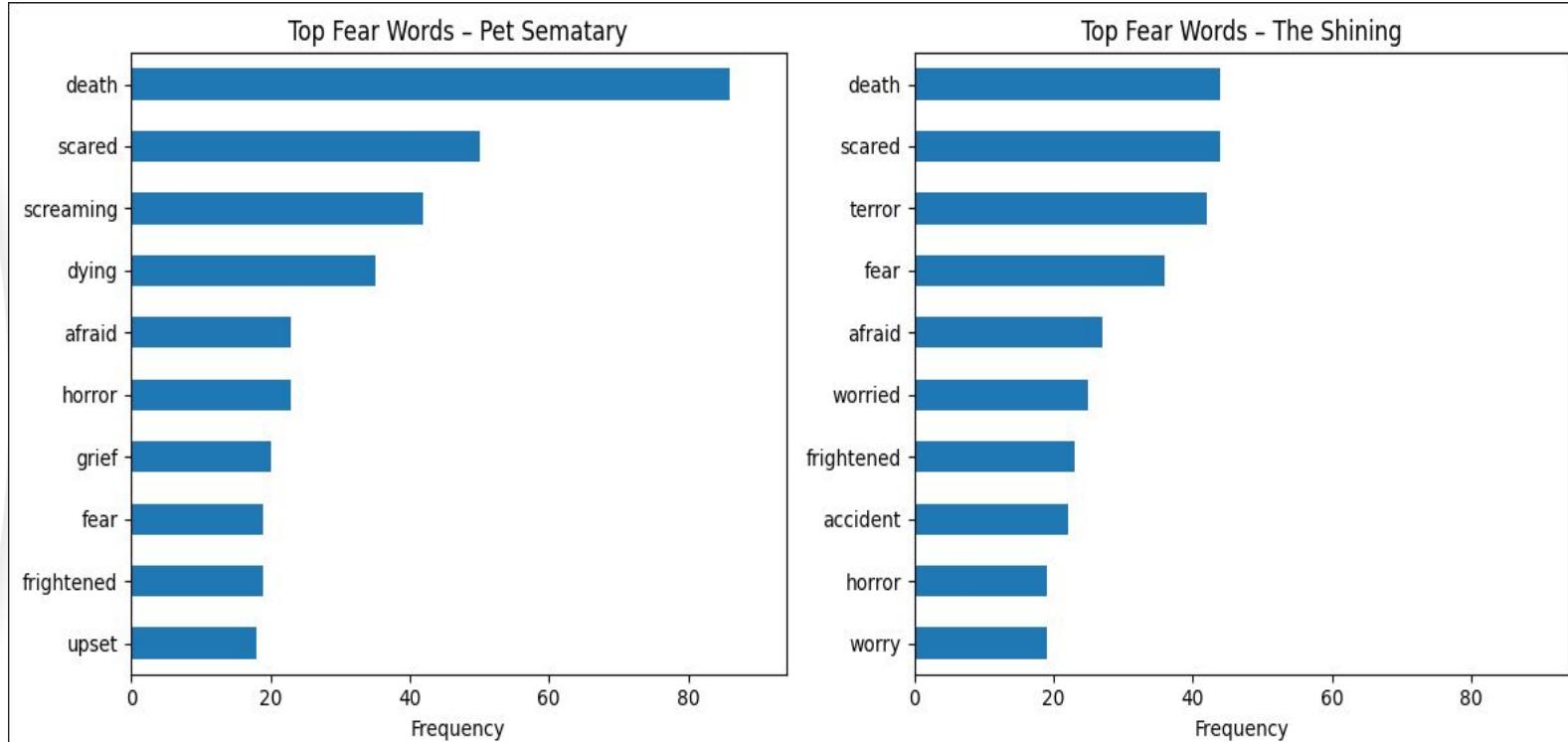
Narrative segmentation (40 parts)

Word embeddings (SentenceTransformer, 384D)

UMAP projection for semantic visualization
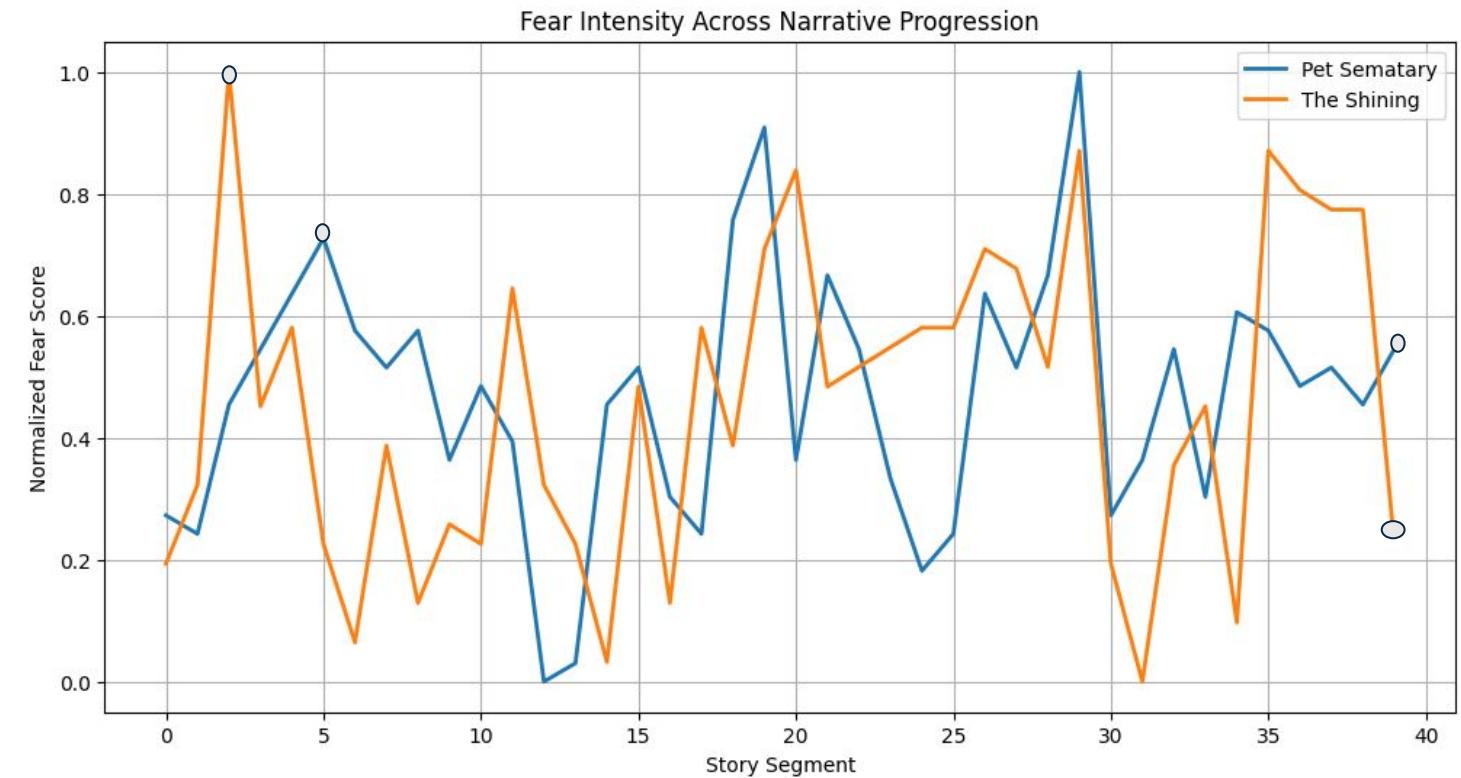
Baseline Lexical Differences

- Common fear-adjacent words: dark, fear, blood, dead

- Pet Sematary: stronger focus on death, burial, grief

- The Shining: more sensory and psychological language

- The genres of the 2 movies already hints that the novels use fear differently

Top Fear Words – Pet Sematary

Top Fear Words – The Shining

Fear Intensity Across Narrative Time

- Pet Sematary: sudden spikes in fear intensity → moments of dread

- The Shining: smoother but longer-lasting tension → psychological horror

- Both books peak near major story climaxes

- King clearly "paces" fear strategically

Fear Intensity Across Narrative Progression

Fear Vocabulary Contrast

- Pet Sematary: most frequent fear words include dead, dark, ground

- The Shining: dark, scream, blood, voice more prominent

- Pet Sematary fear = rooted in death + grief

- The Shining fear = rooted in madness + supernatural tension

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Pet Sematary — Top 2-gram fear collocations
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	n-gram	count
0	death of	14
1	of death	12
2	the death	11
3	the dying	9
4	was afraid	8
5	i scared	7
6	was screaming	6
7	scared and	6
8	death was	6
9	that death	6
10	worry about	6
11	was scared	6
12	to death	6
13	death in	6
14	gage death	6

```
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Pet Sematary — Top 3-gram fear collocations
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	n-gram	count
0	the death of	10
1	death of victor	5
2	he was afraid	5
3	that death was	4
4	the dying man	4
5	to worry about	4
6	she was screaming	3
7	was wary of	3
8	facts of death	3
9	degree of fever	3
10	worry about it	3
11	in the gloom	3
12	screaming zelda dead	3
13	was afraid he	3
14	death in a	3
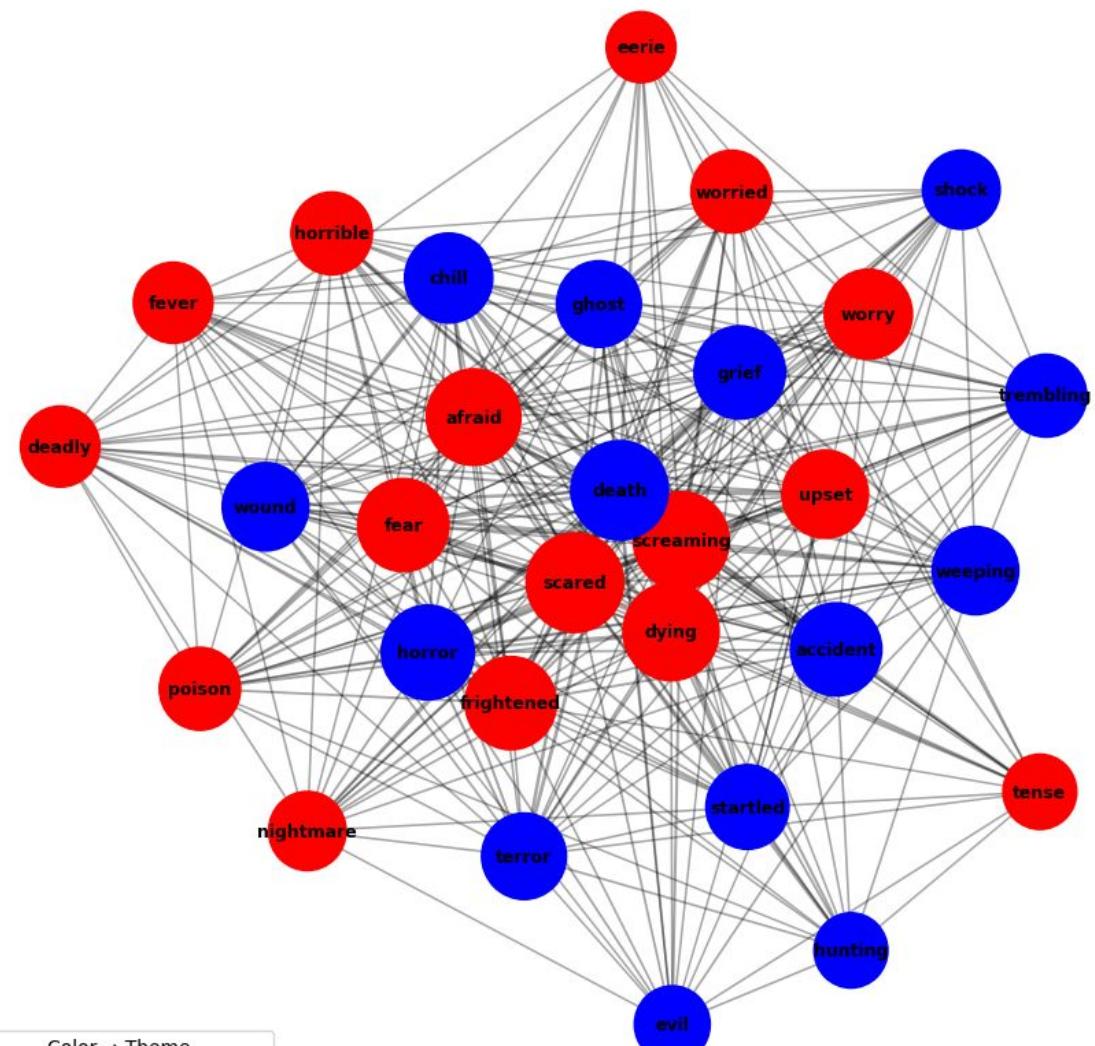
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The Shining — Top 2-gram fear collocations
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	n-gram	count
0	worried about	15
1	to death	13
2	an accident	11
3	worry about	9
4	a ghost	9
5	was scared	9
6	was afraid	8
7	red death	7
8	to worry	7
9	wound up	7
10	was worried	6
11	his terror	6
12	in terror	6
13	scared to	6
14	death held	6
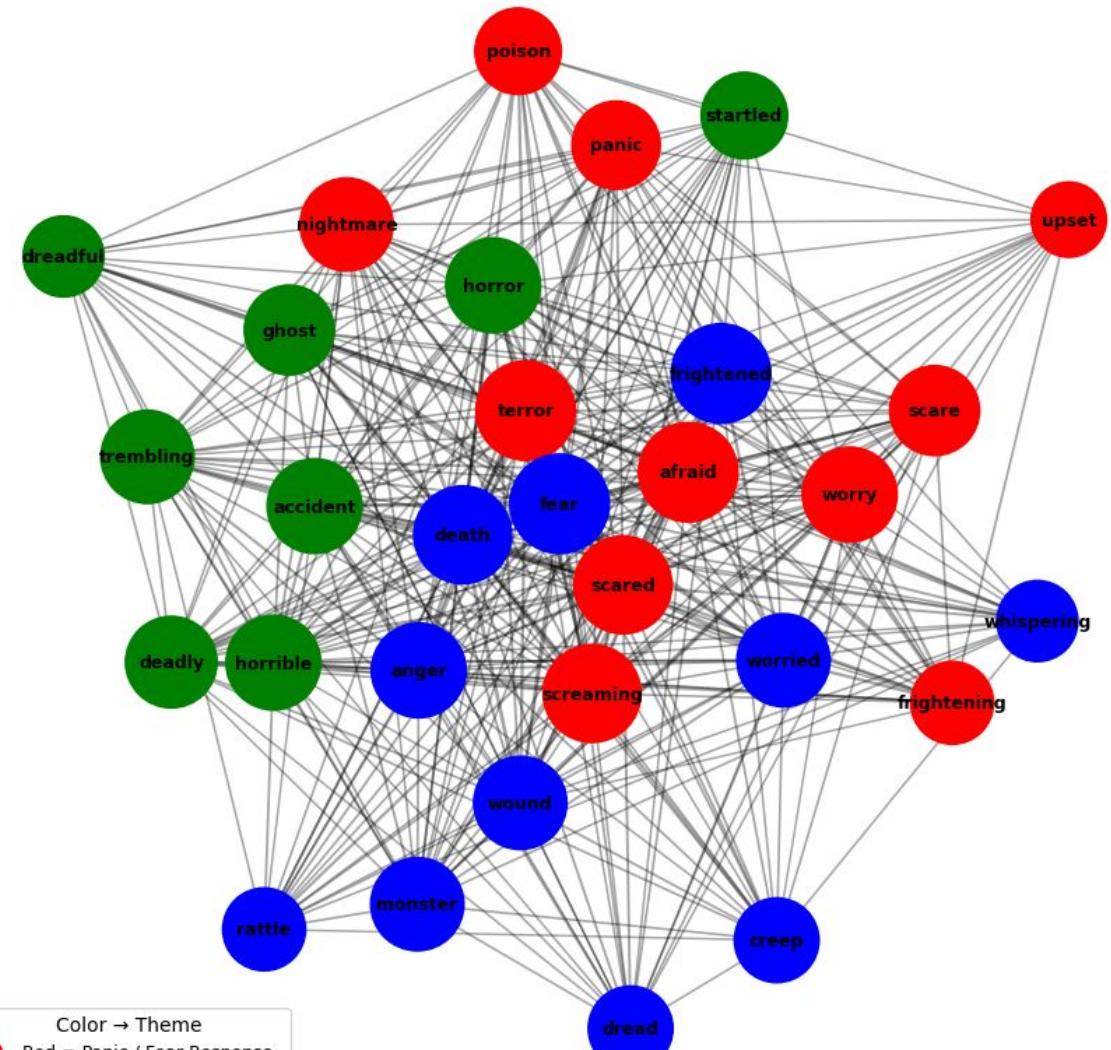
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========================================
The Shining — Top 3-gram fear collocations
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	n-gram	count
0	the red death	7
1	to worry about	6
2	red death held	6
3	death held sway	6
4	had been frightened	4
5	have an accident	4
6	like scary pictures	4
7	he was afraid	4
8	it scared him	4
9	got a ghost	3
10	a ghost why	3
11	ghost why hell	3
12	was worried about	3
13	an accident i	3
14	a car accident	3

Top-30 Fear Co-occurrence (Clusters) – Pet Sematary
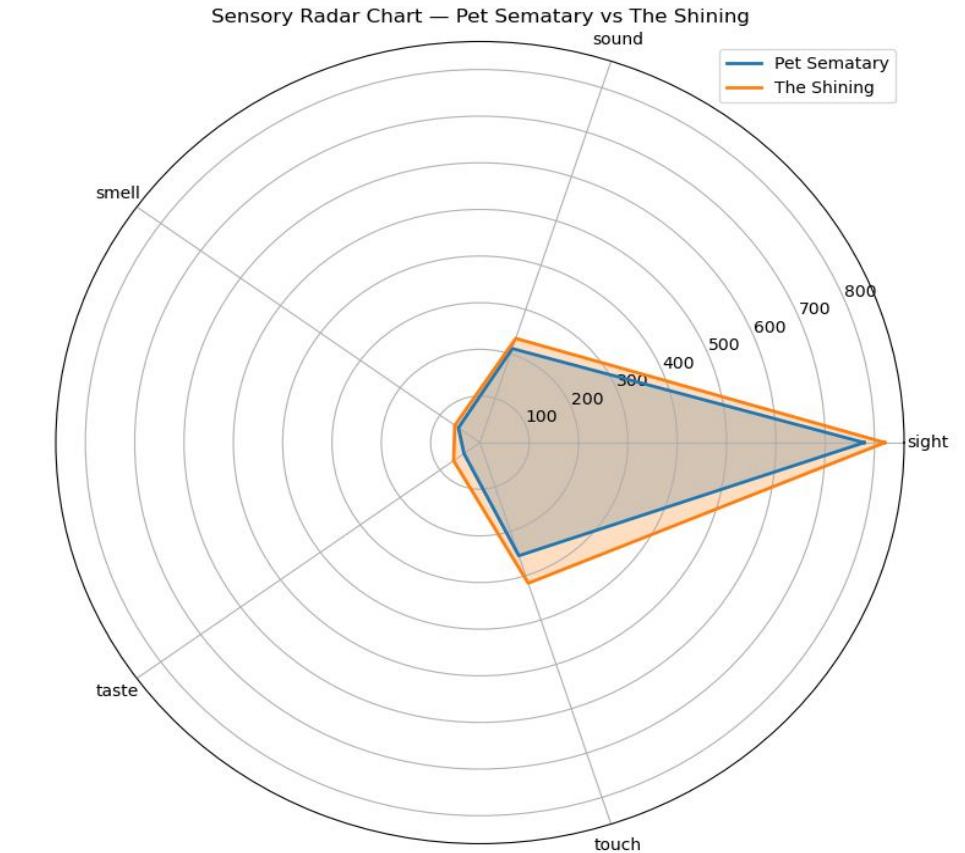
Top-30 Fear Co-occurrence (Clusters) – The Shining

Color → Theme
Red = Panic / Fear Response
Blue = Death / Mortality

Color → Theme
Red = Panic / Fear Response
Blue = Death / Mortality
Green = Mixed / General Fear

Sensory Fear Profiles

Sensory Radar Chart — Pet Sematary vs The Shining

- Visual words dominate both novels — King relies heavily on imagery

- The Shining uses more auditory and tactile words, matching its psychological horror tone

- Pet Sematary uses more olfactory and gustatory words, reinforcing themes of death, decay, and the physicality of loss

- Sensory language shapes each book's emotional atmosphere:

- The Shining → fear through sounds + environment

- Pet Sematary → fear through the body + decay

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Metaphors — Pet Sematary (first 10):
 ['like a path', 'like a man', 'like a large', 'like a blessing', 'like a goddam', 'like a dog', 'like a big', 'like a tomb', 'like a heart', 'like a play']

Metaphors — The Shining (first 10):
 ['like a corpse', 'like a single', 'like a breaking', 'like a book', 'like a couple', 'like a fuckin', 'like a cat', 'like a knell', 'like a breaking', 'like a beat']
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Latent Fear Themes (Clustering)
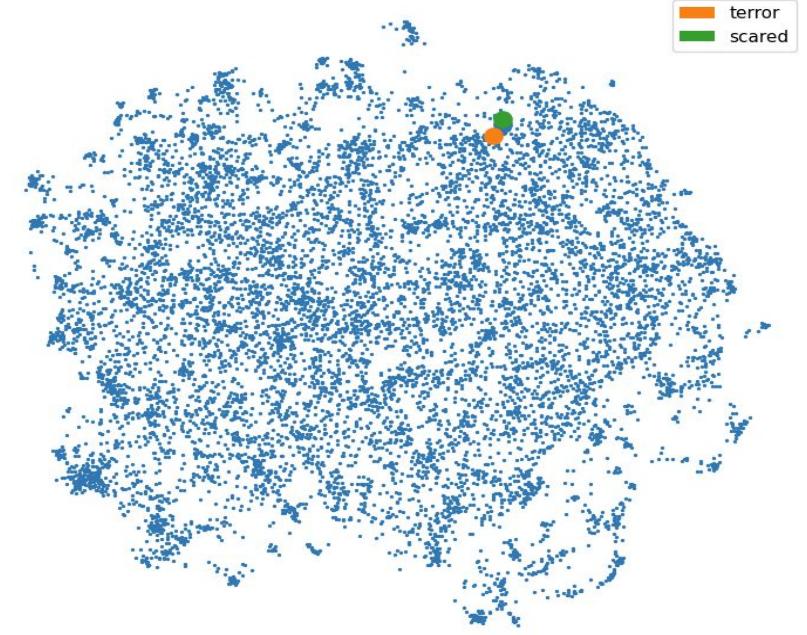
- Word embeddings from all-MiniLM-L6-v2 (384D)
- UMAP projection to 2D for visualization
- Spatial proximity reflects semantic similarity

Continuation
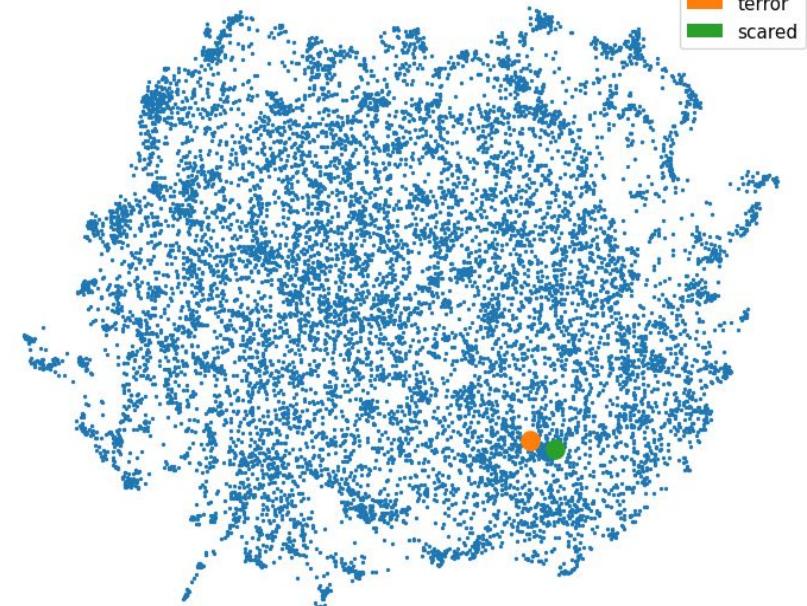
- Clusters revealed distinct types of fear patterns:
  - Violence / blood imagery
  - Darkness & isolation
  - Supernatural cues
  - Mental breakdown vocabulary
  - Setting-driven tension
- Shows King blends internal and external fear sources

Fear Words in Semantic Space — Pet Sematary

Fear Words in Semantic Space — The Shining

Sensory Word Examples

- Top 10 sensory words from each novel

- Frequency chart of senses (Sight / Sound / Touch / Smell / Taste)

- Example sentences showing sensory vividness

--- Nearest Word Table: Pet Sematary ---
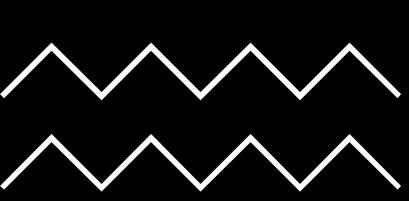
	Word	Neighbor_1	Neighbor_2	Neighbor_3
0	wrenching	loosening	loosen	tools
1	music	musical	melody	singing
2	apples	apple	fruit	cocoa
3	telephone	telephones	phone	dial
4	startle	start	starting	starts
5	accumulating	accusatory	collecting	collected
6	hygienist	housekeeper	specialist	gynecologist
7	storage	storing	stored	memory
8	angled	angle	angles	slant
9	bedpan	dustpan	bed	beds
10	beat	beating	beaten	beats
11	fourth	four	third	three
12	rud	ruff	rutting	ruffling
13	ballpoint	pinpoint	ball	points
14	encouraged	appropriate	provided	allowed
15	del	delessio	trash	sepia
16	accidental	inadvertently	accident	abrupt
17	teach	taught	teacher	lessons
18	buck	bucked	bucks	deer
19	steel	metal	steeling	metallic

--- Nearest Word Table: The Shining ---
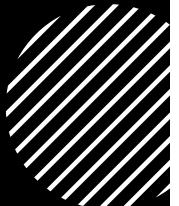
	Word	Neighbor_1	Neighbor_2	Neighbor_3
0	ordinarily	blearily	preternaturally	eerily
1	durkin	dud	durin	harking
2	howie	josh	matt	ryan
3	mystery	mysterious	puzzled	peculiar
4	sequined	sequins	jockeyed	burlesquing
5	raking	rake	raddled	rabble
6	pens	pen	ink	pent
7	seem	seems	seemed	appears
8	buggin	bugle	bugged	bug
9	opinions	opinion	thoughts	subjectively
10	tab	tabs	tablet	table
11	boards	board	floorboards	wallboard
12	skated	skating	skid	toed
13	singed	sang	sing	sung
14	seemed	seems	seem	seeming
15	waves	wave	wavering	waving
16	trucks	truck	vehicles	cars
17	grimy	grimness	toothy	jacky
18	moan	moaning	moaned	whimpered
19	rake	raked	raking	shoveling

Comparative Fear Strategies

- Pet Sematary
- Fear of death, loss, and inevitability
- Sudden fear spikes
- Heavy emotional weight

- The Shining
- Fear of madness, isolation,possession
- Sustained psychological tension
- More supernatural-driven vocabulary

Implications for King's Writing Style

- Uses sensory detail to keep readers on edge

- Fear vocabulary intensifies at plot peaks

- Language creates atmosphere as much as events do

- NLP confirms King's control of pacing + emotional impact

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