Deep in the wilderness of Texas, the untamed, open fields provide a vast space for imagination to run free. Tales of adventure, cattle ranches, gamblers, rogues, and scoundrels abound. In the book Raising Sweetness, author Diane Stanley contrasts the stereotype of uncivilized lawlessness with a story of eight Texas orphans and the sheriff in their town who adopted them. The contrast of a sheriff of the wild west and orphans provides a unique juxtaposition. Despite this contrast of the stereotypical Texas sheriff, a more realistic problem provides the major conflict of the story—the sheriff and the orphans can not read. Although illiteracy was a common problem in the west it is not a respected method of killing off bad guys. Therefore, modern depictions of the wild west overlook illiteracy. Because illiteracy is the main hindrance to the characters’ quest of being able to read a letter, the illustrations to the book become even more important than just providing interest to the reader. The pictures provide a medium in which not only actions and key information, but also emotions are portrayed. These illustrations become an integral part in adding depth to the story. Through the use of coloring, style, details not described in the text, and perspective the illustrations make the story more effective.

The coloring in the pictures makes the story more effective because it portrays the emotion that correlates to the text. For example, one illustration has only the colors brown, black, and white. The corresponding text is a flashback of how the sheriff’s “darlin’ done broke” his heart (4). Thus, the coloring effectively portrays the sad emotion because dark, neutral colors have a depressing connotation associated with them.

Another picture that uses dark coloring portrays the orphanage and the mean caretaker who made the orphans scrub floors with toothbrushes. This illustration uses different shades of brown as the only colors. The picture represents a flashback to a previous book in which the sheriff adopts all the children to save them from the horrid caretaker. The brown tones give the appearance of an old, faded picture. The tones also lack warmth or brightness thus, they correspond to the emotion of dislike for the caretaker. This portrays that the actions took place in the past, and emphasizes the unpleasantness of the memory.

Conversely, the illustrator uses light pastel colors whenever the sheriff’s sweetheart, Miss Lucy, is shown. She arrives wearing a candy pink dress, white sweater, and grass green shoes. These colors, symbolic of spring, life, and happiness, portray the joy the orphans feel at her return. The light pink also symbolizes the love associated with her. She is the sheriff’s true love. In fact, he “adored that woman since God made dirt” (17). Through the chipper coloring, the emotions of kindness, happiness, peace, and love are portrayed, thereby reinforcing the effectiveness of the story by portraying emotion.

The style of the illustrations correlate with the local diction the sheriff uses to describe events. The sheriff uses words such as, “tykes,” “hullabaloo,” “ afore (before),” and “so’s I wouldn’t” (1,5). By using a Texas accent, Stanley makes the sheriff more realistic because his language fits the area in which he lives. The pictures, however, have little realistic value in portraying characters. The illustrator, G. Brian Karas, drew the characters in as a child would draw them. For example, all of the characters have large, round heads, pear shaped bodies, and skinny arms and legs. The bodies have black squiggly outlines to define their shape and have been colored in such a way that the black outline remains visible. This visible, usually squiggly, outline gives the impression that a child has drawn the characters. The drawings, despite their unrealistic appearance, provide a connection between the simple-minded sheriff and the plain manner in which he speaks. Sophisticated drawings would not
fit the story of an uneducated sheriff, nor would they conduct an atmosphere of nonsensical behavior to correspond to the sheriff’s actions.

Many illustrations have added details that are not part of the text. These extra details make the actions described in the text easier to understand. For example, at one point the sheriff decides to clean the windows. He uses real butter instead of lard to clean the windows. This method obviously does not clean the windows, but because children reading the book do not know this, the illustration shows a light yellow, opaque window. This detail emphasizes the error of the sheriff. Thus, the illustration provides a visual picture of the action which helps the reader to understand the effects of using butter to “clean” windows.

In a like manner, the sheriff stands on a box of eggs to reach the top of the window. The text does not mention the eggs, and it is only through the upside down letters e-g-g-s written on the box and the broken egg seeping out from under the box that his mistake is manifest. However, his use of butter and standing on a box of eggs must be present to give full meaning to the last line on the page in which one of the orphans asks, “Pa, you ever think about getting’ married?” The children suggest this every time he makes silly mistakes like this. Without the illustration’s added detail, this question would have less meaning.

Details added to illustrations also help to convey emotion that would not otherwise be a part of the story. For instance, when Miss Lucy eats dinner with the family, the sheriff serves some of his “famous chili” (21). The only clue the text gives to the nasty taste of the chili is her guess at the secret ingredient—catfish. The illustration, on the other hand, shows Miss Lucy with unusually green cheeks and nose as she sits in front of a bowl of chili. The children, lined up beside her, also have this green pallor. This coloring blatantly portrays the disgusting flavor of the chili. Another clue as to the foul nature of the chili is the fish bones sticking out of the bowl and Miss Lucy’s tongue, which is sticking out as well. Karas has added these details to portray the emotions the author only hints exist in this event. Thus, Karas’s added details make the story more effective by portraying the emotion the author wished to have associated with a particular event.

Perspective of the illustrations becomes another avenue for Karas to heighten the emotion of a particular event. During a conversation between Sweetness and the sheriff, they discuss the idea of Sweetness going back to school to learn to read. The conversation builds in intensity after Sweetness states, “Exeptin’ for one little problem” (8). From this point on, she leads the sheriff to the concluding statement in which he discovers that the substitute is the evil orphanage caretaker. This horrible twist of fate will bring Sweetness under the dominion of this woman once again if the family wants to discover what information the letter contains. The illustration corresponding to this text shows the surprise and fear the sheriff feels by contrasting his position with Sweetness’ position. The top portion of the page is filled with text. The bottom portion of the page contains a full body view of Sweetness, who stands with her head tilted to the right. Her small mouth is a tiny oval, to show she is speaking, and to also give her a look of nervousness. Her hands, clasped in front of her stomach, are interlaced, but her thumbs stick out like she is twiddling them. The position of her hands implies she is wringing them in a nervous way. Thus, the perspective of the picture adds to the emotion by allowing the reader to see her whole body.

The sheriff, however, does not need this much of a view to convey his emotional distress. Instead, only his head is shown. It is large and fills more than half the page. Its largeness, and hence closeness to the reader, gives a full view of his raised eyebrows and his dazed eyes. In this position of shock, which is played upon by the shadow covering his face, the dread he feels becomes apparent. By placing Sweetness in the back ground with a full figure view and by placing the sheriff in the foreground with only a partial view, Karas creates a dramatic portrayal of the fear and shock which accompanies the conversation. The text does not directly state this is the emotion that the characters feel. Because of this, the illustration plays a key role in portraying the emotion associated with the conversation.

The perspective of the illustrations also helps to involve the reader directly with the story. For example, one page is drawn from the point of view of Miss Lucy. In the story she reads aloud Sweetness’ note. To allow the
readers to become a part of the action, Karas drew Miss Lucy’s outstretched hands and the note she holds. The white note becomes the text for the page. Thus, the reader must decipher the misspelled plea of Sweetness and in doing so takes on the character of Miss Lucy. This forces the reader to become directly involved because only by reading the note will the reason for Miss Lucy’s surprise appearance become known.

Although Miss Lucy saves the day, illiteracy among the sheriff and his children is not remedied immediately. The children “are all learnin’ how to read now” states the sheriff at the end of the book (26). However, there is no mention of his learning to read and thus, the children have become not only the lifesavers of the sheriff (it was Sweetness who got Miss Lucy to return) but also the continued lifesavers of the sheriff. In fact, he states, “so if we ever get another one of them letters, why, they’ll figger it out in no time” (26). It is the children who will “figger” out what the letter says. Thus, the book encourages young readers (or listeners) to learn to read so they will too be able to read mysterious (and important) letters. Until then, these young readers will have to be content looking at the pictures and listening to someone read the story to them. However, through the effectiveness of the illustrations in conveying emotions of the text, they will have no trouble understanding the plight of the sheriff and his children as they are Raising Sweetness.