Literary Allusions and The Willoughbys

The most interesting thing about the explicit allusion to Little Women in the novel The Willoughbys is the fact that though there are four different “Old Fashioned” women to choose from, Tim decides, when mapping out the future, that Jane must be Beth. While Beth is certainly not a negative character for one to identify with, her future, or lack-thereof, is certainly not one to aspire to. Still, even though Tim means to degrade Jane with his suggestion that she “develop a lingering disease and waste away” he reveals, somewhat inadvertently, the importance of Jane’s character simply by alluding to the Alcott scene in which there is a gathering around Beth before she passes. While Tim does, in this passage, intend to suggest that Jane’s future is bleak, the reference he makes tells us something about Beth, that she was important to her family, and by association, Jane.   
 This information, however, pales in comparison to the other elements of Jane’s character, and, just as importantly, the novel’s thematic messages. When Tim suggests that Jane develop a fatal illness, her response, “I don’t want to,” mirrors more the spirit of Josephine, the strong willed, literary, intellectual March sister, whose rejection of typical social rules about old-fashioned female roles challenges the belief system Tim subscribes to in almost every way. This, along with other implicit allusions made to Little Women, tell us something about who Jane is, and wants to be. Additionally, the fact that Jane so mirrors Jo, who is arguably one of the most obviously feminist literary icons of the 19th century, foreshadows Jane’s future as a feminist literature professor, an occupation which is, essentially, a culmination of all the important elements of Jo March’s character. An argument can be made, however for Jane’s comparison to Beth. For instance, though seemingly insignificant when taken out of the context of the naming of Baby Ruth, both Jane and Beth have one syllable four letter names. This argument better supports Jane’s tie to Jo, however, as Jane longs for a longer, more sophisticated name. Along the same vein, however, Jane’s compassion for the baby on the front porch does mirror the compassion that Beth shows for the baby near the beginning of Alcott’s novel that eventually gives Beth scarlet fever.  
 Baby Ruth and Jane’s interaction with her reveal several other interesting implicit allusions that are embedded within the text. One that I find particularly alluring is that of The Hunchback of Notre Dame. After the baby has been, to Jane’s mind, maimed by Tim’s haircut, and has been dropped off at the Melanoff mansion, we get a glimpse of the children passing time while Nanny’s are interviewed. During which, Jane, playing with her doll, writes the note “I cannot care for my poor ugly baby.” In this way, Lowry’s implicit allusion creates a kind of Quasimodo out of Ruth, in that both Ruth and the bell-ringer are abandoned because they are ugly, and are thus ostracized and frowned upon by society. Within Jane’s immediate world at this point in the novel, Ruth is also frowned upon and made an almost plague by her brothers and parents.

This allusion is important because when you consider the worlds of both pieces and place them within the same context, Ruth, when understood as Quasimodo, is shunned and will eventually wind up taking residency in a place of sanctuary. When this is considered, new evidence that the Melanoff mansion is indeed a safe-haven begins to arise. This is not the only way in which an implicit allusion to Hugo’s work sheds light on the world in which the Willoughbys live, however. An argument can be made, it seems, that the Nanny, when hiding from the potential buyers and real estate agents, becomes a sort of living statue. The gargoyles in Hunchback acted as a sort of guiding light to the protagonist, they were the sort of guardians of the hero. When this is considered within the context of the Nanny’s brief stint as Aphrodite, one can conclude that she too holds an important role within the work as a guardian of the characters with which she interacts when she is “alive.”

Baby Ruth’s placement on the porch of Commander Melanoff also gives the reader the opportunity to tune into another implicit literary allusion. Commander Melanoff’s obvious similarities to Willy Wonka of Dahl’s Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, give reason for the reader to draw other similarities between the worlds of the two pieces. The information readers are given about Melanoff’s candy making career mirrors the information that most readers know about Willy Wonka—he was estranged from his family, having difficulty advancing his career because there was an important life element missing. Like in Dahl’s piece, however, Melanoff’s issues as both a person and a chocolate maker are solved through the involvement of a child, or, more appropriately, children.   
 There is a moment in which the children attempt to encourage the commander by reminding him that while his quasi-selfishness in regards to making money despite the trouble it may cause children with their teeth, he was a good person because he “took in needy children.” In Dahl’s book, the needy child is most obviously Charlie, the protagonist whose poverty stricken family is in dire need of hope. Willy Wonka provides that hope for Charlie’s family in the same way the Melanoff provides hope for the Willoughbys. In this light, the allusion made reveals to us more about the role that Melanoff plays within the work as a sort of hero, and ultimately, a provider of hope.