



Love is a Fallacy

By Max Shulman

I was cool and logical. Keen, calculating, acute. And think of it! – I was only eighteen. Now take for example, Petey Burch, my roommate at the University: same age, same background, but dumb as an ox. A nice type, but very impressionable, and worst of all, a faddist. Fads, in my opinion, are the very negation of reason. To succumb to the pressure of fads is to surrender yourself to the acme of mindlessness. Petey was definitely one of the mindless mob, and after he had expressed his willingness to give “just anything to have a raccoon coat” and to be in with all of the big men on campus, my brain slipped into high gear.

In a trunk at home I had a raccoon coat which my father had worn in his undergraduate days, and Petey had something that I wanted: Polly Espy, who I desired for a shrewdly calculated, entirely logical reason. I was well aware of the importance of the right kind of wife in furthering my career as a lawyer. The successful lawyers I had observed were almost without exception married to beautiful, gracious, and intelligent women. With an omission, Polly fitted these specifications perfectly. Beautiful, she was. Gracious, she was. Intelligent? She was not! But I believed that under guidance, she would smarten up. At any rate, it was worth a try. I figured that it’s easier to make a beautiful, gracious, dumb girl, smart . . . than to make an ugly, smart girl, . . . beautiful and gracious.

Monday I returned to school after my week-end visit home, during which I had picked up my father’s raccoon coat.

Me: Hey Petey! Look what I got!

Petey: Neato Torpedo! A raccoon coat! Wow!

Me: Would you like it?

Petey: Oh, yeah!! (warily) What do you want for it?

Me: Not much. Just your girl.

Petey: Polly? You want Polly?

Me: That’s right.

Petey: (flinging coat) Never!

Me: Okay, if you don’t want to be in with the big men. I guess it’s your business.

Petey: Well, . . . it isn't as though I was in love with Polly, or . . . going steady . . or anything like that.

Me: Uh, huh.

Petey: I mean . . . what's Polly to me, . . . or me to Polly?

Me: Not a thing. Try on the coat.

Petey: It's just been a casual kick – just a few laughs, that's all. Fits fine, doesn't it?

Me: Perfectly!

He looked like a mound of dead raccoons, but he took the deal just like I planned. After my first date with Polly, I could see that I had gravely underestimated the size of my task. It would not be enough to teach her what to think. She had to be taught . . . to THINK! The next evening, when I met her, I began to give her a course in logic.

Me: Polly, tonight I thought we'd talk about logic.

Polly: Logic? Hey! If the shoe fits, I say go for it!

Me: O.K.! Ahemm! Let's see. Logic is the science of thinking. Before we can think correctly we must first learn to recognize common fallacies of logic. So we'll begin to study the various fallacies tonight.

Polly: Whoa! Tell me no!

Me: (wincing) First, let's examine the fallacy called Dicto Simpliciter. Dicto Simpliciter means an argument based on an argument based on an unqualified generalization. For example: Exercise is good, therefore everybody should exercise.

Polly: I agree – I mean exercise is wonderful. It builds the body and everything.

Me: Polly, the statement "Exercise is good" is a fallacy. Many people are ordered by their doctors not to exercise. So you must qualify the generalization. Instead, say, "Exercise is usually good," or "Exercise is good for most people." Otherwise you've committed a Dicto Simpliciter.

Polly: No way! That's radical! Do more!

Me: All right. The next fallacy is called: Hasty Generalization. Example: You can't speak French. I can't speak French. I must therefore conclude that nobody at the University can speak French.

Polly: REALLY!? Nobody?

Me: No, not really, Polly. It's a fallacy. The generalization is reached too hastily. There are too few instances to support such a conclusion.

Polly: Far out! This is more fun than eating pizza even!

Me: (oh boy!) Let's move on and try Contradictory Premises. Here's an example: If God can do anything, can He make a stone so heavy that He won't be able to lift it?

Polly: Well, duh! Of course!

Me: But . . . if He can do anything, He can lift the stone.

Polly: Yeah, well, then I guess He can't make the stone.
Me: But He can do anything.
Polly: Well, if He can do anything, then he can make a stone too big for Him to lift, and then He can . . . no . . . wait. Overload! (hehe) No . . . I can do this one! If He made the stone that is too big . . .
Me: Polly, you're confused because when the premises of an argument contradict each other, there can be no argument. Get it?
Polly: Oh, sure! Yeah! This is so . . . so heavy! Keep going!
Me: (keep going? (winces)) Next we will discuss False Analogy. Here is an example: Students should be allowed to look at their textbooks during examinations. After all, surgeons have X-rays to guide them during the operation; lawyers have briefs to guide them during a trial. Why then shouldn't students be allowed to look at their textbooks during exams?
Polly: That is the most awesome idea I've ever heard! I mean really! It's so logical! Why hasn't someone said something about this before?
Me: Polly, the argument is all wrong! Doctors and lawyers aren't taking a test to see how much they have learned, but students ARE. You can't make an analogy between the different situations!
Polly: Well, I still think it's a good idea.
Me: All right. One more chance. The last fallacy is called: Poisoning the Well.
Polly: How cute! Who made up these names?
Me: Never mind. Listen carefully: Two men are having a debate. The first one gets up and says, "My opponent is a notorious liar. You can't believe a word he says." Now Polly, . . . think. Think hard! What's wrong?
Polly: It's not fair! What chance does the second man have if the first man calls him a liar before he even starts talking?
Me: Right! One hundred percent right! It's not fair. Polly, I'm proud of you. Now let's review.

Five grueling nights it took before my job was done, but I had finally made her think! She was worthy of me at last. The time had come to change our relationship from academic to romantic.

Me: My dear, we have now spent five evenings together. We've gotten along splendidly. It's clear that we are well matched.
Polly: Now THAT'S a Hasty Generalization! How can you say that we are well matched on the basis of only five dates?
Me: Sweetheart, five dates is plenty. After all, you don't have to eat a whole cake to know it's good.
Polly: Uh-uh-uh! False Analogy! I'm not a cake. I'm a girl!

Me: (I felt like Dr. Frankenstein, and my monster had me by the throat. At all costs I had to keep cool!) Well, Polly, you certainly have learned your fallacies. But you really shouldn't take all these things so literally. I mean, this is just classroom stuff. You know that the things you learn in school don't have anything to do with life.

Polly: Dicto Simpliciter! An argument based on an argument based on an unqualified generalization.

Me: Polly, I have to ask you something. Will you go steady with me?

Polly: No, I won't!

Me: Why not?

Polly: Because this afternoon I promised Petey Burch that I would go steady with him.

Me: The rat! You can't go with him, Polly. He's a liar. He's a cheat. He's a rat!

Polly: Poisoning the Well! Now that's not fair! And why don't you stop shouting? I think that must be a fallacy too!

Me: All right, you're a logician. Let's look at this thing logically. How could you choose Petey Burch over me? Look at me – a brilliant student, a tremendous intellectual, a man with an assured future. Look at Petey – a knot head, a guy who'll never know where his next meal is coming from! Can you give me one logical reason why you should go steady with Petey Burch!?!

Polly: I certainly can. Petey has a raccoon coat!