Love and logic: The story of fallacy

I have my first date with Polly after I made the trade with my roommate Rob. That year every guy on campus had a leather jacket, and Rob couldn’t stand the idea of being the only football player who didn’t, so he made a pact that he’d give me his girl in exchange for my jacket. He wasn’t the brightest guy. Polly wasn’t too shrewd, either.

But she was pretty, well-off, didn’t dye her hair strange colors or wear too much makeup. She had the right background to be the girlfriend of a dogged, brilliant lawyer. If I could show the elite law firms I applied to that I had a radiant, well-spoken counterpart by my side, I just might edge past the competition.

“Radiant” she was already. I could dispense her enough pearls of wisdom to make her “well-spoken”.

After a banner day out, I drove until we were situated under a big old oak tree on a hill off the expressway. What I hade in mind was a little eccentric. I thought the venue with a perfect view of the luminous city would lighten the mood. We stayed in the car, and I turned down the stereo and took my foot off the brake pedal. “what are going to talk about?” she asked.

“Logic.”

“Cool,” she said over her gum.

“The doctrine of logic,” I said, “is a staple of clear thinking. Failures in logic distort the truth, and some of them are well known. First let’s look at the fallacy Dicto Simpliciter.”

“Great,” she agreed.

“Dicto Simpliciter means an unqualified generalization. For example: Exercise is good. Therefor, everybody should exercise.”

She nodded in agreement.

I could see she was stumped. “Polly, “ I explained, “it’s too simple a generalization. If you have, say, heart disease or extreme obesity, exercise is bad, not good. Therefore, you must say exercise is good for most people.”

“Next is Hasty Generalization. Self-explanatory, right? Listen carefully: You can’t speak French. Rob can’t speak French. Looks like nobody at his school can speak French.”

“Really?” said Polly, amazed. “Nobody?”

“This is also a fallacy,” I said. “The generalization is reached too hastily. Too few instances support such a conclusion.”

She seemed to have a good time. I could safely say my plan was underway. I took her home and set a date for another conversation.

Seated under the oak the next evening I said, “Our first fallacy tonight is called Ad Misericordiam.”

She nodded with delight.

“Listen closely,” I said. “A man applies for a job. When the boss asks him what his qualifications are, he says he has six children to feed.”

“Oh, this is awful, awful,” she whispered in a choked voice.

“Yes, it’s awful,’ I agreed, “but it’s no argument. The man never answered the boss’s question. Instead he appealed to the boss’s sympathy – Ad Misericordiam.”

She blinked, still trying hard to keep back her tears.”

Next, “I said carefully, “we will discuss False Analogy. An example, students should be allowed to look at their textbooks during exams, because surgeons have X-rays to guide them during surgery.

“I like that idea,” she said.

“Polly,” I groaned, “don’t derail the discussion. The inference is wrong. Doctors aren’t taking a test to see how much they have learned, but students are. The situations are altogether different. You can’t make an analogy between them.”

“I still think it’s a good idea,” said Polly.

With five nights of diligent work, I actually made a logician out of Polly. She was an analytical thinker at last. The time had come for the conversion of our relationship from academic to romantic.

“Polly,” I said when next we sat under our oak, ‘tonight we won’t discuss fallacies.”

“Oh?” she said, a little disappointed.

Favoring her with a grin, I said, “we have now spent five evening together. We get along pretty well. We make a pretty good couple.”

“Hasty Generalization,” said Polly brightly. “Or as a normal person might say, that’s a little premature, don’t you think?”

“I laughed with amusement. She’d learned her lessons well, far surpassing my expectations. “Sweetheart,” I said, patting her hand in a tolerant manner, “five dates is plenty. After all, you don’t have to eat a whole cake to know it’s good.”

“False Analogy,” said Polly promptly. “Your premise is that dating is like eating. But you’re not a cake. You’re a boy.”

I laughed with somewhat less amusement, hiding my dread that she’d learned her lessons too well. A few more false steps would be my doom. I decided to change tactics and try flattery instead.

“Polly, I love you. Please say you’ll go out with me. I’m nothing without you.”

“Ad Misericordiam,” she said.

“you certainly can discern a fallacy when you see it,” I said, my hopes starting to crumble. “But don’t take them so literally. I mean this is all academic. You know the things you learn in school don’t have anything to do with real life.”

“Dicto Simpliciter,” she said. “Besides, you really should practice what you preach.”

I leaped to my feet, my temper flaring up. “Will you or will you not go out with me?”

“No to your proposition,” she replied.  
“Why?” I demanded.  
“I’m more interested in a different peritioner – Rob and I are back together.”

With great effort, I said calmly, “How could you give me the axe over Rob? Look at me, an ingenious student, a tremendous intellectual, a man with an assured future. Look at Rob, a muscular idiot, a guy who’ll never where his next meal is coming from. Can you give me one good reason why you should be with him?”

“Wow, what presumption! I’ll put it in a way someone as brilliant as you can understand,” retorted Polly, her voice dripping with sarcasm.” “Full disclosure –l like Rob in leather. I told him to say yes to you so he should have your jacket!”