Psychoanalysis is a psychological approach that focuses on the concepts of Sigmund Freud and helps us to understand human behavior. D.H. Lawrence’s Sons and Lovers (1913) is a text that cries out for a psychoanalytic interpretation. One of Freud’s most famous theories is the Oedipus complex, which deals with a child’s emerging sexuality. Freud used the story of Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex to help illustrate his theory. In the story, Oedipus unwittingly kills his father and marries his mother. According to Freud, all male children form an erotic attachment to their mother and are jealous of the relationship the father has with the mother. The male child fears he will be castrated by the father so he represses the sexual desire for the mother and waits for his own sexual experience. However, if the boy does not fulfill these steps, then he will carry the oedipal complex with him into adulthood (Dobie 52-53). As a result, having this complex makes it very difficult to form adult relationships with others. In other words, if the child never grows out of this type of behavior, he will be dysfunctional in adulthood.

The Oedipus complex theory attracted attention in 1910 when psychoanalyst Ernest Jones published Hamlet and Oedipus. Freud had already applied his theory to literature, but this was the first time the Oedipus complex had been emphasized in a major literary work such as Hamlet. The character of Hamlet shows signs of having a repressed Oedipus complex in the relationship he has with his mother (Guerin 161-162). In Sons and Lovers, Gertrude Morel has a dysfunctional relationship with her two sons, William and Paul. Therefore, the text is conducive to this type of analysis because the Oedipus complex and
other psychoanalytic concepts are displayed so vividly in their relationships.

The beginning of the Oedipus complex appearing in William and Paul is exemplified in the relationship between the parents. The boys witness an abusive marriage in which Walter Morel often comes home drunk after squandering the family’s income gambling. All of this causes the boys to hate their father and be sympathetic and protective towards their mother.

In their mother, the children see someone who is good and pure. She, in turn, keeps her sons all to herself and sheltered from their father. By this act, Gertrude Morel is unconsciously molding her sons into what she wants, so eventually they can take the place of her husband. She is clearly unhappy in her marriage, so she tries to live vicariously through her sons. This is the stimulus that allows the oedipal attachment to form in the two boys.

William is the oldest son and the mother’s favorite. He does everything he can to please her. Sibling rivalry exists between William and Paul as they compete for their mother’s affection. Mrs. Morel becomes jealous of William’s female companions and he eventually moves to London. William’s moving to London was his unconscious way of trying to break free from the oedipal attachment to his mother. In London, William meets a girl by the name of Lily. They become engaged but William is not happy. He has a misogynistic attitude towards her. It is very clear Lily does not possess the good qualities he sees in his mother and it angers and frustrates him.

William exhibits classic symptoms of displacement. When William voices his dissatisfaction with Lily, his mother asks him to reconsider marrying her. He responds, “Oh well, I’ve gone too far to break it off
now (Lawrence 130). These conflicted feelings that William is experiencing are a sign of his apparent struggle to rid himself of the oedipal fixation and the reader is not surprised when William eventually gets sick and dies.

After William dies, Paul takes his place as his mother’s favorite. By her actions, one would think she thought of him as a suitor. This is evident when she accepts a bottle of perfume spray from him. “Pretty!” she said in a curious tone, of a woman accepting a love-token (Lawrence 69). As Paul reaches adulthood, it is quite evident the Oedipus complex has taken him over. His relationship with his father is strained and he becomes jealous of him. He even asks his mother not to sleep with the father anymore (Lawrence 215).

Paul meets Miriam Leivers and although he likes her, he repeats the same misogynistic behavior as William did with Lily. He feels he would be betraying his mother by being with her. However, the idea that Paul is interested in someone other than his mother shows an attempt to break the oedipal fixation he has. But, the mother foils this attempt by making him feel guilty for wanting to be with Miriam. She says, “I can’t bear it. I could let another woman – but not her. She’d leave me no room, not a bit of room. And I’ve never -- you know Paul -- I’ve never had a husband, not really” (Lawrence 212).

This same behavior the mother exhibited with William, by being jealous of his female companions, is now being inflicted on Paul. She reinforces the Oedipus complex that is within Paul by suffocating him and in a subtle way asking him to replace her husband. Paul’s relationship with Miriam is reduced to friendship. He has to repress any romantic feelings that he might have for her, so she will not replace his mother.
Later in the novel, Paul does become physically intimate with Miriam, but it is short-lived because Paul will not marry her. This also shows that Paul suffers from a fear of intimacy as he continues to remain emotionally detached from Miriam. Once again, Paul succumbs to the oedipal attachment for his mother. However, Paul does have an affair with a married but separated woman by the name of Clara Dawes. Paul allows himself to have this relationship because he knows that realistically this relationship can never go anywhere. She would never divorce her husband. Therefore, Clara is not a threat to Paul’s oedipal fixation to his mother. There is no danger of her taking his mother’s place.

Paul’s mother becomes ill. Since she is bedridden and in pain, Paul gives her morphine. However, he administers an overdose of morphine to her, which leads to her death. While this might be seen as euthanasia, it seems equally likely that killing his mother was Paul’s unconscious way of releasing himself from the Oedipus complex once and for all. Her death leaves Paul devastated and alone. Although much time has passed, Miriam still wants to be with Paul, but he refuses. It is clear that even after his mother’s death, he is still not free from his attachment to her because he chooses to remain alone. The dysfunctional relationship with his mother is still present in Paul’s life and it appears the Oedipus complex is still intact.

By applying psychoanalytic criticism to Sons and Lovers, one can gain a better understanding of the text. What may at first look like unbelievable behaviors can be understood and recognized by using this type of criticism. Psychoanalysis adequately explains the relationships within the Morel family. It also allows us to see the Oedipus complex, which is so blatant throughout Sons and Lovers.