Edgar Allan Poe was one of many nineteenth-century authors who took an interest in phrenology. The prevalence of the science in British and American culture meant that contemporary readers of his work would understand any phrenological references he made. Walt Whitman, Charlotte Brontë, Herman Melville, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and Mark Twain, among others, all used phrenology in their writing, both seriously and to humorous effect. Many of these writers even submitted to phrenological examinations at some point, including Whitman, who had the results of his exam published multiple times.

Shown here in its first published appearance, “The Imp of the Perverse” criticizes the omission of perversity from the phrenological classification of organs. The science is invoked both explicitly and implicitly in other Poe works. The vivid description of characters is often conveyed through specific phrenological traits, such as Roderick Usher in “The Fall of the House of Usher.”