Journal Entry on Civil Disobedience

1) Why would Thoreau's essay be called "Civil Disobedience"?

The essay is probably called “Civil Disobedience” because it is about the relation between the control of the government and how society acts, specifically focused in America.

2) According to Thoreau, what is the definition of a government?

Thoreau defines government as “only the mode which the people have chosen to execute their will, is equally liable to be abused and perverted before the people can act through it”. Going off of this, Thoreau sees the government as the safety net for civilians to act on their own decisions and only be there to prevent negative consequences from occurring.

3) Thoreau suggests that "We should be men first, and subjects afterward." What is the difference between the two? Why do you think Thoreau makes this suggestion?

Thoreau makes this suggestion because he believes that men should have the free will to make their own decisions before acting on another’s will. The whole point in being your own man is the freedom to make your own decisions, and then they will be more willing to act upon another’s decision. Along with this, he believes we have the conscience to make our own decisions.

4) Do you think Thoreau looks down on soldiers, captains, generals, etc? Support your answer with textual evidence (from what he actually says in his essay).

He looks down on them because he more so sees them as “machines, with their bodies” rather than just men. He believes that soldiers, captains, generals and etc lack freedom and with this, he believes that they have the “same sort of worth only as horses and dogs”.

5) What examples does he cite of conscientious men that were made the enemies of society (but were later vindicated and are now held in high esteem)?

The examples he uses are heroes, martyrs, and reformers are the men that use their conscious but are made enemies of society. He also talks about how there are men that serve as lawyers, ministers, politicians, and legislators are “selfish” but are seemed to be held at high esteem due to the job that they carry out, but act selfishly when they ones who are seen as the enemy, act selflessly in the name for another man’s life. One thing that stood out to me was that “he who gives himself entirely to his fellow-men appears to them useless and selfish; but he who gives himself partially to them is pronounces a benefactor and philanthropist”.

6) How does Thoreau exercise "civil disobedience"? What happens as a result? Does his action fit in with your view of active citizenship? What else would you have done if you were in his shoes during his time period?

Thoreau seems to exercise “civil disobedience” in a sense of providing his opinion on the government and war. He sees that the “unjust laws exist” in a way that “we cry and resist before we are hurt”. With this quote, he mentions that we should provide reform and we should have the power to make mistakes because that is what comes along with freedom. He believes that certain punishments do not fit the crimes that were committed and that it needs to be changed because men have enough conscience to understand when they have done wrong and they should only try and do better and learn from the mistakes or unjust acts they committed. That is the point of freedom, to make decisions on your own. I would have done the same as him which is make my voice known through not paying poll-tax because he didn’t want to pay for unjust imprisonment. Due to this he almost went to jail for longer than a night. In order for him to get his voice across, he had to show actions rather than just only speaking his mind to try and make a difference. If I was in his time period, I probably would try and speak my mind but risking going to jail for the cause would be difficult for me unless I truly believed in what I was saying.