Immortality In Epic of Gilgamesh

Death is an inevitable part of human life. People cannot know or predict their own death time. Life is noble by the fact that there is death in it. The Epic of Gilgamesh gives us no easy answers to the questions about meaning of death and mortality, and shows the inevitability of death. The overall theme of the epic concentrates on Gilgamesh's rejection of his mortality and his consequent desire for immortality.

According to the story, Gilgamesh is a powerful king who will never be immortal. He possesses superhuman courage and strength. Since life is not eternal for mortal humans, the semi-divine Gilgamesh wishes to be remembered. The king of Uruk tries to express his own power, given from the day he was born, in oppressing others. He forcibly takes the 'the daughter of the warrior' and 'the bride of the young man' (1/75). Generally he treats all his people as equally beneath him. Gilgamesh is restless and living his life for his own satisfaction without any thoughts about the death and immortality. So after meeting with wise companion in the face of Enkidu, created as an equal one to Gilgamesh, and making a strong friendship, he, forgetting about his duties, starts doing heroic actions to retain his fame and legendary name given at birth.

During Gilgamesh's journeys, his character has been developed and the main reason for this is the death of his precious friend. The horror of mortality overtook the king. Nothing frightens him as death, even though he has got the heroic power: "I'm afraid of death" (9/5). Gilgamesh's description of death as "this sleep that has seized [you]" (8/55) shows an example of figurative language in a metaphorical form. Sleep is often used as an allegory for death. So it seems that death is like an obscurity for him. The king is no longer living happily, enjoying his life since life loses its meaning to him. He wonders himself what kind of life is this where he can be at any moment destroyed by the power of death.

"Shall I die, and shall I not then be as Enkidu?" (9/3) Indulging in such thoughts, Gilgamesh can't control his anxiety and tries to gain immortality before he reunited with the dead Enkidu.

The word "death" is so important because it literally shows Gilgamesh's immense fear, which leads to realization and acceptance of his mortality during the whole epic. He learns, late, from Shiduri that it is better to accept and enjoy life rather than seek immortality since "the life that you seek you never will find" (9/Si i 5') So this teaching and the failure in conquering Death helps Gilgamesh to assume his mortal existence and find his place in the world as a king. On his return to Uruk, he accepts his mortality, having learned to enjoy everything he has and take accomplishment in what he has done for the city. It is seen at the epic's conclusion when Gilgamesh speaks to Ur-Shanabi: "A square mile is city, a square mile date-grove, a square mile is clay-pit, half a square mile the temple of Ishtar: three square miles and a half is Uruk's expanse." (11/327)

In Kyrgyz language an accurate word "death" is "olyum". As this word appears in many Kyrgyz legends and fairytales, it fits for an epic. But it is not going really well if, for example, we consider Gilgamesh as a Babylonian Er-Toshtuk. Undoubtedly, these two characters are both heroes, but the main difference between them is how they treat death. To make it clear,

Gilgamesh's big fear is mortality and Er-Toshtuk is not afraid to look into the eyes of the death. So they are not really comparable. For Kyrgyz people death is something natural to human-beings. There is an imaginary of Netherworld's life after death. Person will rather receive a place in Heaven or Hell. What mostly important is that it depends on how you live your life. You'll never know how long you have left. So you should accept your mortality, live happily, do nice things, build good relationships and be true to yourself without concentrating your thoughts and time on the inevitability of death and unachievable things such as immortality.